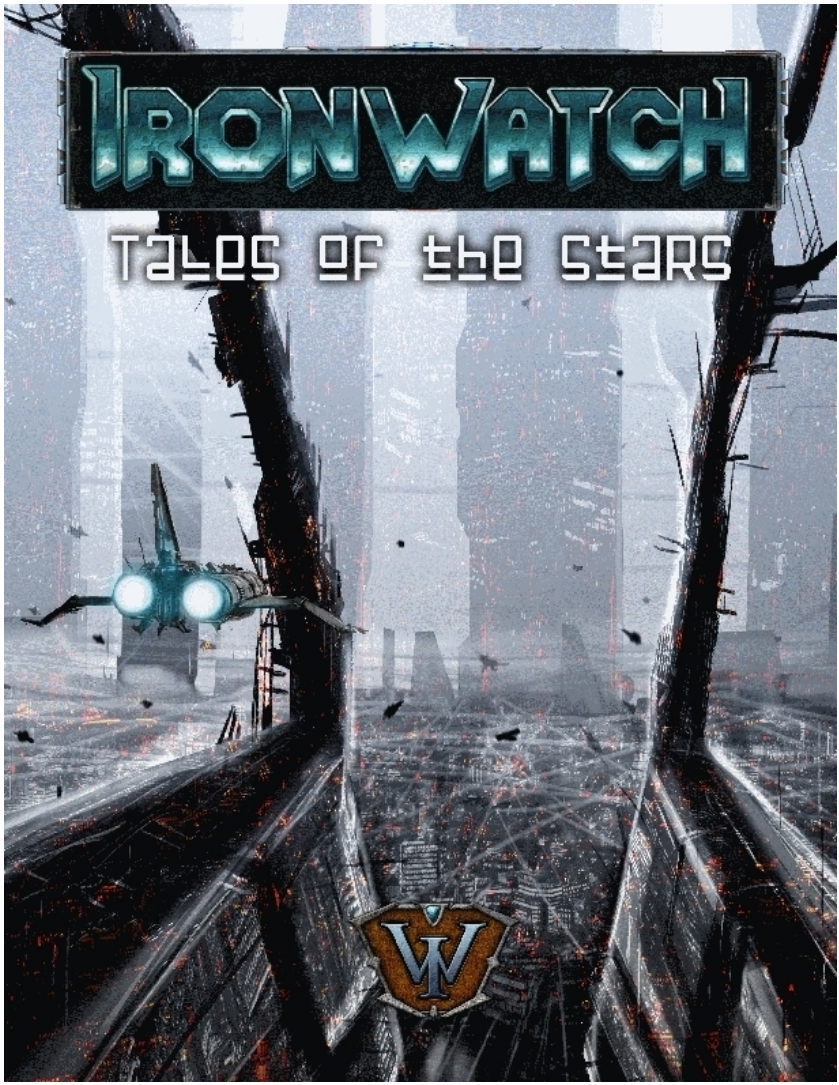
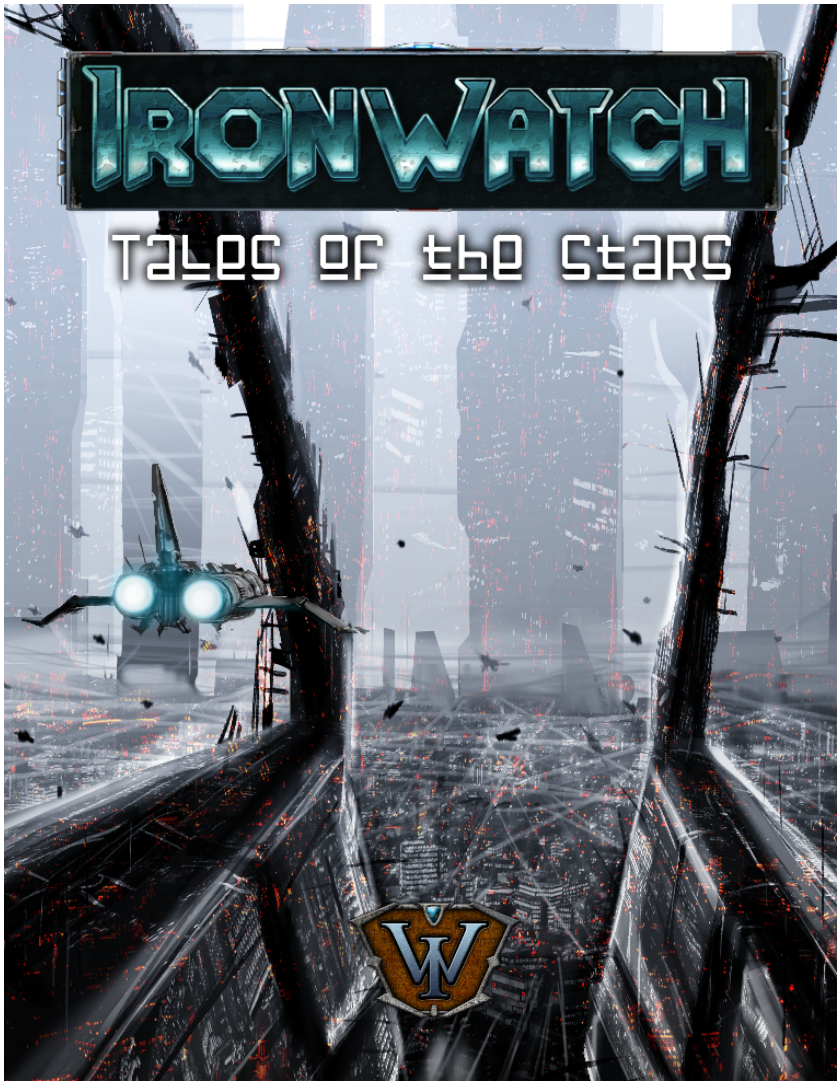

IRONWATCH
TALES OF THE STARS



Ironwatch: Tales of the Stars

Stories assembled by Austin Peasley

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Introduction

Over the past half-decade, one of the key strengths of the Ironwatch magazine has been our fiction. From the Corporation and their Enforcers, to the Marauders, Plague, and even forays into Mars Attacks, the stories have been a constant highlight of Ironwatch's content over the years. We're glad to finally be able to put these epic tales and chilling accounts into a single collected volume for you to enjoy.

As of writing this introduction, Ironwatch is approaching it's twilight. We've had dozens upon dozens of issues packed chock-full with fantastic content, and while the publication will soon be ending, we're not done yet. Planned in August, celebrating our 6th anniversary, will be the Ironwatch finale issue, and we'd love to see your content to help make it memorable. If you have something you'd like to contribute, please contact us at ironwatchmagazine@gmail.com.

Ironwatch wouldn't be where it is today without our writers, both past and present. Thank you for your contributions, for crafting narratives that kept our readers and editors alike coming back for more, and for helping to expand the world of Mantica for other fans to enjoy. You have been the backbone of the magazine, with readers reliably able to anticipate some adventure or epic in the next installment to capture the imagination. I'd also like to provide a brief shout-out to thank Michael Grey, who contributed a huge number of Warpath-themed stories to us over the years, and to Matthew Lindsay, whose Deadzone: The Cleansing ended up being an entire 90-page novella that he kindly let us serialize and distribute over our issues.

Now, without further ado, please go and enjoy the tales within! We appreciate the opportunity to be a conduit for one of the oldest human endeavors, that of storytelling, and we hope these legends help inspire you to craft and pass on your own tales to others in the years to come.

Austin Peasley
Editor-in-Chief
March 2018

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Asset Procurement

by Michael Grey

Klaxons blared, invading every section of the ship with a volume of almost physical force. Spinning strobe lights accompanied the clamor; a constantly rotating bar of orange washing every surface, and ensuring everyone onboard knew this was no drill.

Lieutenant Klein stalked down the loading ramp, passed the long line of marines. Their body amour's hard lines reflected the caustic light as they snaked forward to collect their rifles. To Klein, it was as if some monstrously armored reptile was making its way to the hangar. *Not entirely inappropriate,* he thought.

The ceiling reared above as he emerged from the confined corridor and into the hangar. The ship's bay stretched the length of *Andromeda Star*. Rows of interceptors rolled out in either direction, hornets ready for when the nest was disturbed.

And if *'disturbed'* could ever be applied to a Corporation heavy cruiser, this would be it. Activity boiled around Klein as flight engineers primed the 'cepters, pilots downloaded attack plans and marines formed into teams.

He passed his own squad as he walked to the command platform. Pride rose when he saw they were among the first ready as Sergeant Haskomb ran them through their final checklist. Klein caught his eye as he passed and received the curtest of nods in return.

Better than nothing, he thought, and mounted the platform.

"Sub-Lieutenant, glad you could join us," Commander Zaman Kamry said, interrupting whatever he was saying to Lieutenants Garcia, Kahn and Wehnn.

"Apologies, Commander. It's the dichotomy of rank; furthest bunk from the bridge, but I'm thankful for the exercise."

Garcia and Kahn smiled at the joke but Kamry's expression

hardened. His demeanor matched the ironed naval jacket and starched high collar precisely. “This is no time for humor, Sub-Lieutenant.”

“Zaman, let the boy go.” Klein had not seen Captain Winters. He stood away from the central table, staring into banks of monitors rolling with data. His fatigues disrupted his outline, blending him into what shadows the screens allowed. Klein felt a measure of relief to see they worked, only for that relief to whither as Winters turned. The Captain’s usually congenial face was porcelain pale.

“Now we’re all here, perhaps you can tell them everything you know,” said Winters, coming to the table.

For a moment it looked as if Kamry would say something in return. Instead decades of naval training came to the fore, although the sour look on his face went nowhere. He turned a dial on the table and a deep green 3-D projection of the local system sprung up between them.

The *Andromeda’s* position, lost amid the gulf of stars, was represented by the pulsing orange coda of SLA Industries, spinning sedately as if it were just another moon. Klein recognized the closest planet, Declan Six; a hydrogen-heavy gas giant with a lone silvery ring. Declan Six occupied most of the projection, with Declan Five, their destination, hovering innocently at the table’s periphery. A ghostly thread linked Declan Five to the Andromeda.

“As you can see we are still on course for D-Five. SLA’s contract on the planet still stands and will be acted upon. But four hours ago the navi-com picked up trace signals from D-Six.”

Kamry pushed another button and a revolving net sprung up on the projection, from the *Andromeda* towards the gas giant.

“Moon?” asked Garcia with a raised eyebrow.

Kamry shook his head. “That’s what it was logged as initially, but it didn’t match any of the recorded moons’ orbits. The navi-com sat on it for another two hours, tracking and monitoring. It raised the alarm when we came into scan range.” He held up his tablet and

flicked the screen. "*Uneven, asymmetrical object. Albedo of 0.17%. 18% raw mineral of varying nature, 78% refined ore in perpendicular layers, forming levels airtight to vacuum."*

Klein and the other Lieutenants turned their attention to the projection, focusing on Declan Six. "A ship," breathed Wehnn.

"What was once one, certainly," said Kamry. He pressed another button and a second icon illuminated over the table. This one, like the *Andromeda,* displayed by an icon holding seemingly still over the planet.

"Further scans could not identify the vessel's origin. It's not on our or any other corporation's list of ship templates. The closest likeness is the Asterians, but if it is it's not one we've encountered before. But what data has been returned is telling us it's old. Very old. It's been in space long enough to be caught against several meteors. That would be the 18% raw mineral, but somehow the strikes fused to the hull rather than destroy it."

"So it's a salvage op," said Garcia.

"Not quite," said Winters. He leaned in and pushed a button on Kamry's control panel. Another bowed trail lead from Declan Five, this time away from the planet, taking it near the gas giant's gravity well. "Commander?" said Winters.

Kamry's expression at being interrupted was thunderous yet controlled. "This is the route of Corporation Planetary Mapper designation ASX609. That was the exploration vessel which mapped and logged the Declan system. It recorded D-Five's Asset Level as 'Exploitable' before leaving to go out-system, logging this as their intended route," he indicated the crescent path.

"However, all signals ended as they neared D-Six. It was assumed the planet had some unusual makeup, such as an unusually high magnetized iron core, or inner tectonic activity releasing bursts of gamma radiation; something which would cause ASX609 to fall into the gravity well. The incident was recorded and was marked to investigate. Once colonization had begun, obviously. However, when the time and position of ASX609's route are calculated to that

of the new contact...” he tapped a series of buttons on the panel.

A tiny representation of a Corporation Mapper ship emerged from Declan Five and began a steady loop along the plotted course. At the same time the icon representing the contact reversed its spin and began to backtrack, following D-Six’s curvature.

Klein’s eyes went back to the Mapper. At regular intervals an orange box would appear above it, displaying flashes of data; speed, course, engine metrics. He looked between it and the contact again, and knew what would happen before the little theatre before him could play out.

ASX609 followed its inexorable path, passing into what would have been Declan Six’s shadow while the contact bore down on it from above. Once the two met, ASX609 winked out of existence, and the contact continued on its route.

“What happened?” said Klein.

“That is what we’re going to find out, Lieutenant,” said Winters. “Could have been they simply collided with an object they didn’t see. Could be something else.”

He shifted his stance, feet apart, hands crossed at his lower back. “That’s all the intel we have. Teams Alpha through Theta will board at alternating levels with the Can Openers, and be aware the superstructure is made of some kind of dense alloy, so we’ll be out of radio contact with the *Andromeda.* Sweep and find, people. Any questions?”

“Which one is our pod?”

They all turned. Kaige had mounted the command platform with his usual silence, prompting the same from everyone else.

Klein felt himself tense involuntarily. All the Enforcers had that affect on him, but none more so than their leader, and the way Garcia’s hand flexed near his pistol it was obviously not only him.

They had arrived the morning of their departure. No warning, no

explanation. None necessary really, Klein thought. Kaige had walked into their final prep meeting, announcing himself without expanding on the tag. If it was a name or rank Klein didn't know.

"I didn't think you'd be joining us after you didn't answer the alarm, Kaige," said Winters, loading his words with deference.

The Enforcer turned his face to Winters, inclining it through the eight inches height difference. "We make our own preparations, Captain."

"With all due respect, Kaige, this appears to be nothing more than a recon mission. I wouldn't have thought your men would be interested."

"You do not need our reasons, Captain. We will board at the foremost of the vessel. Our coordinates have been uploaded to your systems."

And with that, he left, and Klein felt himself relax.

"No one said the robots'd be coming, Lieutenant."

"Lawson you will not speak to an officer unless spoken to. Goddamnit son, do I have punch that information into you?"

Robots? Is that what the men have taken to calling them? Understandable, thought Klein. "It's all right, Sergeant, questions are permitted." He leaned forward as much as the pod's restraints would allow.

"We didn't know ourselves until we left. You all know how the Enforcer's work; if they decided they were coming along, nothing would have stopped them. Not even your fearsome reputation, Lawson." That got a laugh. "But it's a big ship and there's only five teams, plus them. Chances are you won't even see them on board. If you do, be smart and stay out of their way, okay?"

The squad said nothing to that. They were Corp Marines, and damn good ones. They had pride, and being reminded they weren't the best rankled.

The Enforcers had been assigned their own deck of the *Andromeda,* and since departure Klein had barely seen the black-armored soldiers. When he had it was mainly in the gym block, where the marines kept their bodies and skills sharp. They would enter, all of them, as far as he knew, although he never saw more than eight, and everyone else knew it was time to leave.

The first time Klein saw a younger marine do what could have been the biggest mistake of his life. He had just arrived, and didn't like having to leave straight away. He shouted at the nearest Enforcer, mere feet from his faceplate, using insults from half a dozen different planets.

The Enforcer had done nothing. Just stand there, face plate turned in the marine's direction, looking to Klein how someone else would regard an angry insect.

Whatever would have happened to the marine was averted when his sergeant hauled him away, still yelling, out from the room.

That left Klein, and the Enforcer turned to him. Klein didn't want to leave either but he knew futility when he saw it, so packed his bag and headed for the door. He stopped at the Enforcer, however, and ripped off a parade ground salute which would have brought tears to his old drill sergeant.

Before he left the Enforcer tilted his head a fraction, and Klein left feeling lucky on more than one count.

He leaned back, wedging his shoulders between Haskomb and the wall. The Incisor Mk 4 Full Insertion Craft was roomier than the old Mk 3s, but only barely so. A squad of ten would have to be very comfortable with another man's sweat before even a short journey was made.

They were already on their way to the contact, having been fired from the *Andromeda* like bullets. Klein was not looking forward to the landing. The *Incisor* was deigned to puncture a ship, sealing off the hole with quick hardening gel, securing atmospheric integrity in a boarding action, before the pointed lead end opened like a

flower. Although in this case a flower whose petals could exert fourteen tons of force per square inch. And in typical marine fashion the image of a flowering bud was passed over in favor of *Can Openers* for a nick name.

He had been on two such insertions before. Neither was pleasant. It was rough and dangerous, with a thousand things which could go wrong. And that was before the doors had even opened.

“Impact in T minus 10 seconds, gentlemen,” said a static-filled voice through the intercom. “Happy landings.”

“Go get f-”, started one Marine before the pod was shaken so violently Klein’s vision blurred, and he thought his teeth would be jarred from his gums. The moment came with the internal kick of turbulent deceleration and the torturous squeal of twisting metal.

The sensation was over as quickly as it arrived. Sergeant Haskomb reacted first, out from this seat, shotgun in hand.

“Alright ladies, what are we waiting for, a welcoming party? Let’s go! Go! Go!”

He slammed the underside of his first onto the red, flashing button by the door. At once the pressure seals hissed, and hydraulic gas discharged outside as the doors peeled open. The first marines were out before a full breach could be declared. No one wanted to be on enemy ground in the technological equivalent of a barrel.

“Clear!” came the cry, followed by three others. Klein stood on unsteady legs and followed the rest of the squad out.
Rifle lights lanced out this way and that. They had breached in a hexagonal corridor, devoid of turns as far as the Can Opener’s lights allowed, and black as space.

“Breach secured, Lieutenant.” Haskomb marched behind his men, resting his shot gun on one shoulder and tapping his knuckles on the helmets of marines he was particularly happy with the positioning of.

Klein checked his tactical computer readout. Then rechecked it.

“Problem, Lieutenant?” Haskomb was regarding him with a sardonic smile.

Klein ignored him and slapped the tac-com with an open palm. “We missed our target,” he said when the screen didn’t change.

Haskomb swore. “Goddamn navies couldn’t find their arse with both hands.”

“No, not that.” He walked over to the wall the ‘Opener had turned into an entrance. “We’re forty meters further in than we should be.” He rapped on the wall. Dull metal flaked away where his knuckles hit.

“Rust,” said Haskomb over his shoulder. “Haven’t seen that on a ship in a while.”

“No, not rust.” Klein picked up a lump which crumbled in his fist to sooty flakes. “Degraded.” He looked up at an un-broken section and ran his hand over it. It felt warm under his palms. “It’s no kind of alloy I know. But everything degrades over time. The data said it was old.” He dropped the rotting metal.

“Old enough to rot un-rustable metal?” Haskomb’s voice had an edge of uncertainty he’d never heard in the Sergeant before.

“It doesn’t matter, the mission remains.” Klein wiped his hand on his fatigues. “The scans didn’t penetrate this far so we’ll have to make our own map.”

“As you will, sir,” said Haskomb, sounding more like his old self.

Klein’s radio crackled. “Theta? Come in Klein, this is Winters.”

“Captain, this is Klein.”

There was a short pause before Winters answered. “Sitrep, Lieutenant.”

“Breach successful. Although we’re deeper than anticipated.” He

looked down the corridor in either direction.

“Us too,” said Winter’s static laden voice. “Same with Beta. No word from Delta or Gamma yet. They probably landed in too far for radio. Orders remain, Lieutenant; sweep and record. Winters out.” And with that the radio went dead.

He looked up to see Haskomb looking at him, and shrugged. “Sweep and record.”

***

Klein had Theta Squad move down the corridor in standard formation, Marines leapfrogging each other’s position in swift duck walks, ensuring no quarter was ever left uncovered. Haskomb treated the whole thing as an exercise, striding between the team, berating sloppy movement and offering sparse praise if a junction was negotiated to his approval.

Klein stayed between them, eyes shifting from his tac-com to the ship around.

Other than the hexagonal shape of the passageways everything else was rounded smooth. The bulkheads where corridors joined seem to grow into one another, and the pipes which ran along sections of wall and the gantry they walked on seemed melded into the structure. And it was black. Completely black. Whatever the alloy was, it was uniformly without color, a torchlight-eating matt throughout each corridor.

At unmarked sections they would pass a room. None had doors they could see, and each was empty of furniture or clues as to what they may have once been used for. A pile of grey dust settled on the gantry of one room, sifting between the slats when Klein walked to investigate, but what little he managed to gather gave him no indication to its origin.

“Thoughts, Sergeant?” he asked as they negotiated a long stretch of corridor.

“I ain’t paid for them, sir,” Haskomb sniffed.

“But you have them, nonetheless, and I’d like to hear them. Consider it an order if that helps.”

Haskomb thought on that a second, before saying, “I don’t like it, sir. Nothing about this sits right, if you get my meaning. It just sitting here, and for how long? The mapper going off chart just as it passes it, and them Enforcers... they wanted on here, sir. They wanted on here bad, and they knew where they were going, too. No, I don’t like this one bit.”

“Klein? Theta, come in,” chirped Klein’s radio.

Klein switched it on, watching as Haskomb’s face set, and wondered if he would be able to carry on the conversation later. “Klein here, Captain.”

“Klein, pass the order; weapons free. I repeat; weapons are free. We have hostiles on board. Copy receipt.”

In the still darkness the words carried and Klein saw their affect immediately. Torches no longer scanned, they leapt from spot to spot with purpose, while a few marines risked Haskomb’s wrath to look at their Lieutenant.

The urgency in Winters’ voice prompted a dry swallow. Klein suppressed it and activated the radio.

“Copy Captain, weapons free. Anything we should know?”

“We found Delta. Or signs of Delta. Two rifles and Garcia’s tac-com. As of now we have to assume hostiles are active on this vessel. I want extreme caution from here on, Lieutenant. Report anything you find, copy?”

“I copy. Orders remain?”

“Roger that, and continue on your sweep. Winters out.” The radio crackled to silence.

He looked at his men. Haskomb hadn’t interjected and some still

looked at him, fear and trust fighting for dominance on their faces and Klein was glad he'd control the swallow.

"For those of you who didn't hear; weapons are free. Feel free to shoot at anything that moves. Clear?"

"Aye, aye," the squad responded, some with more enthusiasm than others. He could hear the solid clacks of magazines being checked and a bass thrum as the plasma rifle was charged to ready.

"What the Lieutenant means people, is that we carry as on before, and woe betide anything that crosses our path. Can I make myself any clearer? No? Then let's go! Sluzinski, you take point." Haskomb's bark grounded Klein's imagination, and he felt guilty when the Sergeant looked in his direction with a tacit check for permission.

"As you were, Sergeant. Let's wrap this up."

They swept another deck. Klein was aware he was checking the tac-com's map obsessively; watching as it traced the decks and walls around them with harsh white lines, and willing it meet up with the Incisor as they made a slow loop around the ship, and when they could launch back to the *Andromeda.*

He had lost count of the rooms they had logged when Sluzinski, at the squad's head, held up a fist.

The affect was immediate. Marines crouched where they stood and the air was crisscrossed by rifle lights checking the all clear.

When nothing launched itself from the darkness Klein edged up to Sluzinski, Haskomb at his behind.

"What was it, marine?"

"Noise, sir. But not close."

"What kind of noise?"

Sluzinski hesitated before answering. "A boom, sir. Like a grenade

going off. I felt it through my boots, too. Loud, but far away."

Klein looked back to Haskomb and found his eyes trailing down to the rounded fragmentation grenades at his belt. Haskomb saw and nodded concurrence. "Anything else?"

He shook his and head and Haskomb slapped him hard on the back before heading back with Klein. Back in position Klein went for his radio, but Haskomb's hand was on his wrist before he could flick it on. Klein looked at the older Sergeant as he leaned in close and said in a whisper low enough not to carry, "We don't know what's going on here, sir. Could be the outer structure disintegrating after the 'Openers landed, and anything you say's gonna be heard by the lads. There's no need to go spreading panic."

Klein regarded Haskomb. He was right. If Sluzinski had heard anything it was too far away for them to do anything about it. But fear made Klein reach up, pluck Haskomb's hand from his own, and click on the radio.

"Captain. This is Theta, come in."

"Report, Lieutenant," said Winters' voice in a distant crackle.

"We heard explosions, Captain. Most likely personal munitions size. Most likely on a different level. Copy?"

Klein flicked off the transceiver and waited. No answer was immediately coming and he saw the tension grow along Haskomb's jaw line. Then, "-mmit. Say again, Klein."

"Munitions, Captain. On another level."

Another pause. "Roger –at. Hold position." Once more the radio went silent.

"His signal's breaking up," Haskomb said. "Structure's playing hell with the radio."

Klein nodded but said nothing. Instead he looked over Sluzinski's shoulder and into the pitch black beyond. The darkness suddenly

held more than the possibility of clues or survivors, and in spite of the cool, dead air he felt sweat prickle his brow.

When the radio chirped up a moment later he nearly jumped. “Klein, Beta isn’t responding to hails. Have you had any contact?”

Klein looked into Haskomb’s eyes as he answered. The old Sergeant’s steadier gaze helped keep his voice under control. “Negative, Captain. What about Gamma?”

“Still not checked in. I don’t like this. The mission’s changed, I want you and your squad back at the Incisor as soon as is safely possible. Copy?”

“Copy. Klein out.”

He didn’t need to look at the squad to know they heard everything. The air held an expectant quality; tension radiating from each Marine. He checked the tac-com and could have cursed. They had completed over half of their sweep, and now the swiftest route back ran through un-mapped territory.

“Going ahead could be risky, Lieutenant,” said Haskomb, looking over his shoulder. “No telling if there’s even a way back that way. Could be dead ends from here to the arse end of nowhere.”

On a logical level Klein agreed. Emotionally, all he saw was the shorter distance between them and their flight back.

“We go on, Sergeant. As before.”

Klein thought for a moment Haskomb would say something. Instead he said, “Aye aye, Lieutenant,” inflecting his words so Klein could not help but know what he thought of the decision.

They moved down the corridor, covering intersections with multiple rifles and giving each room the most cursory of checks before moving on. Klein periodically re-checked the tac-com, willing the walls it drew around them to meet with the Incisor which still seemed so far off. Then Sluzinski stopped and held up his fist again.

Once more the squad responded, dropping to one knee and covering the perimeter, daring anything that stayed in the darkness beyond their lights to come at them.

Klein edged forward and held up a hand to Haskomb when the sergeant went to follow. That last thing he wanted were his decisions questioned again.

“What is it, Sluzinski?”

He didn’t answer straight away, but kept gazing forward, moving his head gently, not following the path of his torch, as if he could scent something.

“I’m not sure, sir. Just... something.”

Klein looked over Sluzinski’s shoulder into the darkness. “What kind of something?”

“I’m not sure sir. But something isn’t right here.”

Y*ou’re not wrong there,* he thought. Instead he squeezed his shoulder and told him to hold position. Sluzinski nodded and went back to his vigil. Klein went to move back to the rest of the squad, but stopped midway. Sluzinski had good instincts, and enough of this fubar’d mess gave him the creeps that he wasn’t about to go ignoring them now. He needed a soundboard, but seeing Haskomb’s glowering expression, brooding at being excluded, made him reach again for his radio.

“Don’t do that, Lieutenant.”

The voice was deep and low, came from a direction his mind told him should be empty, and was accompanied by an unmistakable metallic click.

His hand froze midway to his radio. When no other orders were forthcoming he took a guess he was not going to be shot, and risked turning his head to where the wall should be, and looked down the void of a gun barrel. Klein forced his eyes to move beyond, and at

first could not see a sign of where the gun came from, but by degrees he made out the glint of a shoulder plate, the vague border between two shadows became a bulky thigh, and then the parts as a whole became Kaige.

“Thank you for your compliance, Lieutenant,” he said.

There was another, rougher click, and a shotgun barrel was at Kaige’s temple. “Drop it, sir,” said Haskomb.

But Kaige just turned his head, his armor staying in its place, and looked down to Haskomb. “I wouldn’t if I were you.”

And then they were surrounded. Klein couldn’t say where they had been before. It was a straight corridor section, one like they had passed through a dozen times before; with no doors or adornments; but the Enforcers were there. Around them, and, among them; Kaige.

The Marines reacted as well as could be expected; maintaining their positions but careful to make sure their weapons didn’t wander in the direction of any Enforcer. Haskomb, though, pumped his gun’s action and moved the barrel an inch forward. “Now, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Kaige didn’t take his eyes from Haskomb, but lowered his gun nonetheless. Then reached up with his other hand, placed a finger tip on Haskomb’s shot gun, and gently pushed the barrel downwards.

Haskomb looked ready to bring it right back up again, and Klein spoke up before he had the chance. “You mind telling me what’s going on here, Kaige?”

“Of course. That’s why I stopped you before you could spoil everything. You can have your men stand down, by the way. We’ve swept this area and I can promise you it’s quite safe.”

Klein made no move to do so and Kaige moved on, unconcerned to whether Klein did so or not.

“You’re a good man, Lieutenant. Your potential has been noted and has been transmitted to Corporation Central, but you are not equipped to aid in what we’re doing here.”
“And what is it you’re doing here?”

Kaige’s lips curled into a grin Klein would not quickly forget. “We’re hunting.”

“Hunting what?” Klein’s pulse quickened and he almost called his men to station. “Us?”

Kaige chuckled. “No. No, nothing so mundane. Mapper ASX609 noted this derelict with its last transmission burst. Its position and structure were noted to fit certain parameters, enough so its discovery was communicated among the right people. That it was ASX609’s final transmission was enough proof that something Central had been wanting for a long time was resident on this vessel. That’s why we’re here, Lieutenant.”

The realization struck with enough force that Klein nearly shouted, sending his words down the corridor, and damn whatever heard them. “We’re *bait?”*

Kaige nodded with no sign of shame. “I am glad you were not caught, Lieutenant. You will have quite a career ahead of you, and the first step along that career is keeping off your radio.” Kaige’s eyes went to the handset on Klein’s chest strap, emphasizing the quasi-order. Klein grasped it like a talisman.

“And Captain Winters?”

Kaige said nothing.

Haskomb looked between the Enforcer and Klein. He could see words behind the sergeant’s face, urgently wanting to be spoken, but the man held his tongue.

“I see,” he said. “And what would be required of us?”

“Nothing.” Kaige stepped to one side as if to let him pass. “The route to your pod is open. You will return to the *Andromeda,* the

original mission will proceed as planned and when you return to Central you will be rewarded for your assistance."

Klein looked at Kaige in his hulking armor, dominating the corridor, then to the Enforcer's surrounding them, then finally his men. He nodded.

Kaige inclined his head and turned to leave.

"What is it you're hunting," Klein said to his back. Kaige paused, and then turned back.

"Do you believe in fairy tales, Lieutenant?"

"What?"

Kaige stepped forward startlingly fast, making almost no sound. "Did your mother tell your stories at bedtime? Of creaks in the night and hidden teeth which keep to the shadows? Always on the prowl for the feet of little boys which get out of bed at night?"

Klein nodded, unsure where the questions came from and not liking where they were going.

Kaige leaned in. "We're after the grown up kind." And he turned, walking passed Haskomb and the squad, by the rear guard and into the darkness. The marine at the back raised his rifle to follow a fraction later, and Klein was only partly surprised when it showed nothing but an empty corridor. It was only then he realized the rest of the Enforcers had gone also; slipped away from notice until only his squad was left in a pool of artificial light, trapped between two seas of night.

Haskomb came up to Klein in a stormy rush. "Lieutenant, you can't mean to-!"

Klein held up a warning finger. He did not look to the sergeant. His eyes were still on the patch of black which swallowed Kaige, searching the corridor.

He was impressed. Kaige's armor was monstrous, yet the man

moved with a dancer's step. And if he could hide amid a full squad, an empty corridor would hold no challenges.

Slowly he brought his finger to his lips. Haskomb's neck went red as the words he obviously needed to say gathered in his throat, but still Klein waited. Would Kaige still be out there? He wasn't sure. That was the problem, he didn't know anything. Whatever he did from now on was pure guess work.

But Kaige had said they were hunting, and as good as said Captain Winters and Alpha were the bait. And if they intervened to stop him stumbling into their trap, then surely they would need all their numbers together.

He hefted the tac-com and took his bearings. "Sergeant, ready the men to move out. We'll be going fast, and pass the word I want chatter to a minimum."

The sergeant looked ready to swear. "I wouldn't have thought that would matter if our way back to the pod was clear."

Klein stowed the tac-com and pulled his pistol, checking the action. "We're not going back, Sergeant." Afterwards Klein realized that was the first time he had seen Haskomb smile.

***

He couldn't use the radio. Kaige would know, and Klein did not want to see the Enforcers appear amongst them again. That meant getting a warning to Winters in person. Perhaps between the two squads they would stand a chance of defending themselves against the Enforcers, and whatever else was on the ship.

Klein expanded the view on the tac-com until it showed the route Alpha took on their own sweep, synchronized wirelessly from Winters' own computer. The limit of Alpha's own map told him where they were. Klein aimed his own marines in that direction and moved.

No mind was given to branching corridors or rooms other than cursory checks. The primary need was for speed, and the second

silence. The men moved as quietly as fully geared marines could. Hand signals replaced words, a fist and a wave telling each marine all he needed to know.

Klein tracked their movement with quick glances to the tac-com. The painted lines springing up around their position etched quickly, and the dust motes swimming past, disturbed by their swift passage, told him just how fast they were moving. But would it be fast enough?

He strained to detect anything beyond the squad's torches, but always his eyes were checked from seeing further than their moving island of light, and the only sounds were the clang of boots on gantry. In the ship's decades long silence it must sound like cannon fire, and he could only hope Kaige, his men and their quarry were too intent on the hunt to hear their approach.

Sluzinski was still at their head, approaching a branch in the corridor when he once more dropped to a crouch, causing marines to fall over the men front as they stopped.

"Get down!" hissed Haskomb, pulling the nearest marine to a squat. "Lower your bloody profiles, and double those fields of fire."

Klein checked the map. They were perhaps two corridors from Winters' position. And that meant anything could have spooked Sluzinski. He sidled up to point, hearing and seeing no sign of what caused the stop, and said in a soft whisper. "Marine?"

"I don't know, sir," Sluzinski said with s shake of his head. "Something. Maybe footsteps."

Klein listened. Nothing. "How many and heading which way?"

"Like I said, I'm not sure." He raised his head a fraction and tilted it this way then that, straining to hear. "Maybe this way?" He shifted his rifle light down one branch, highlighting nothing but dust motes. "Or this." He swung his rifle around in time for a pale face to launch itself at them.

Sluzinski cried in surprise, falling backwards in his haste to aim,

and fired a ragged burst into the ceiling.

Klein brought his own pistol up, but without Sluzinski's torch he may as well be blind. He aimed in the direction the face came from, but before he could fire something took him in the gut, driving the air from his lungs and sending him backwards beneath his attacker.

His pistol was dropped, forgotten in the struggle. Instead his arms came up. Partly in defense, partly flail at the unseen weight on his chest.

Then the weight was gone and light filled his world. He blinked and the tableau swam into view. The light was a marine's torch. Above him Haskomb held the struggling form a marine Klein half recognized in a bear hug.

The man fought like a trapped animal against Haskomb's hold. He threw his head to either side and flailing boots caught Haskomb against the knee caps several times, but the old sergeant did not flinch.

"Calm down, soldier! Cam down!"

The man continued to struggle, adding strained grunts to his fight. Klein saw a scream work its way up the man's throat, and pushed himself up, aiming to clamp one hand over the marine's mouth before he could alert anyone to their presence. But before he could get there he looked into his eyes, and what Klein saw stopped him dead.

The marine opened his mouth to complete the scream, "Run!"

Klein twisted his head, turning towards the direction the man came from, looking down into the darkness. The dumb response of prey which knows it is in the hunter's sight. He sensed the rest of the men do the same until the entire team looked into the abyss.

Time slowed. The only sound the rushing of blood in Klein's ears. And then something, faint, at the very periphery of his hearing.

He strained his ears, leant forward a fraction, as the extra inch would make the sound discernible.

There was something out there. Some kind of... scuttling?

The corridor further down lit up with the staccato burst of rifle fire.

Someone around him shouted in panic. Fire was returned, by one, two, then three guns, until the corridor was a deafening tunnel of flashing red.

“Stop!” He barely heard the voice above the fire, and only just registered it was his own. “Stop! Cease fire!”

The shooting died almost as quickly as it began, until all that was left was the panting of his men and the *clink-clink* of cooling barrels.

“Lights,” he ordered.

Rifle lights trained on the corridor, their mass easily illuminating the carnage left in their wake.

It was like intruding on a nightmare. The laser rifles had done their job perfectly; cutting through armor and skin alike, leaving behind a bloody mess of bodies, slumped against each other on the floor, leaking blood over the black, alien bulkhead.

But the most horrifying of all was the face of Lieutenant Garcia staring lifelessly from the middle of the heap, his mouth open in an eternal *O* of surprise.

“Go! Let me go!”

The marine in Haskomb’s arms still struggled, fighting to be free.

“What the hell is going on, soldier?” demanded Klein.

He received no answer, just another series of grunt as the man heaved against Haskomb’s arms.

Klein’s backhand caught him square across the jaw, numbing Klein’s

arm to the elbow but shocking the man into silence.

“What’s happening?” he ordered again. “Where’s Captain Winters?”

Gunfire erupted once more down the corridor, from behind the mass of bodies that were once Garcia’s squad. Faltering bursts lit the black alloy like lightning.

As one his squad raised their own rifles. “Hold your fire,” shouted Klein. He did not want any more blood on his hands. Haskomb gave up his fight to keep hold of the marine to lend his shotgun. The man fell to the deck but was off in a second, dodging between marines and fleeing into the darkness.

A shout brought Klein’s attention back. The shooting down the corridor was becoming sparser, replaced by the pounding of feet on deck, and then a figure vaulted the smoking pile of Beta Squad.

Klein relaxed a fraction when he saw it was human-shaped and not in the hardened armor of an Enforcer. When the figure stood he almost did not recognize the blood-specked face.

“Captain Winters!” shouted Klein.

Winters looked shocked to see Klein and Theta, but rallied quickly and was soon up and running toward them. Behind him two more marines were clambering over the charnel pile, struggling with one hand clutching their rifles, either not knowing or not caring what they pulled themselves over.

As the two marines landed and ran, one more reached Garcia’s dead squad. Panting in ragged breaths, his eye’s whites showing in Theta’s torch lights. He dropped his own rifle to free both hands. It fell from view, pointing its light against the bulk head. Shadows flashed across the wall with frightening speed in the man’s direction, and with a cruel prescience Klein saw what would happen before it unfolded.

The marine threw himself to the top of the pile, landing with a wet thump and, and began to scramble on all fours over its top.

Before he made it half way the man arched backwards until his head was bent up at a painful angle, mouth as open as his eyes, and let forth with a single noted scream. Then the cry stopped suddenly, at the same moment the light dimmed in his eyes, and then he was pulled back. With a damp slithering noise his body was yanked over the hill of bodies by unseen hands.

The discarded rifle light danced once more with swift shadowy forms, retreating into the ship along with a *chittering* sound that sent a shiver down Klein's spine.

And then they were alone, with Winters and two men from Alpha squad.

Klein looked around. All his men stared at the body pile. Looks of disbelief mingled with that of fear. Winters also stared down the corridor, breathing like a sprinter and looking ready to vomit.

"What the hell's going on?" he demand, not bothering to make it sound anything other than an order. When Winters just kept on staring Klein shook him hard by the shoulder. "Captain?"

He focused with some effort on Klein, seeming to pull himself together.

"Lieutenant." He took a breath, swallowed. "Lieutenant. We need to get out of here. Now."

"Yes Captain, but where is your squad? Where are they?"

Winters looked around, for all the world as if he was surprised where he found himself. "Gone," he said. "Gone. Those... those *things."*

"What things!" He grabbed Winters by the shoulders and shook him hard. "What things, Captain?"

"They came out the wall, sir," said one of Winter's men. "Right goddamn out of the walls. They don't need the light, and they moved like buggery. You can barely shoot them. We tried to retreat but the bulkhead behind had closed, sir. We got stuck there

with Beta. And then they got among us."

"They closed the bulkhead," Klein whispered. He turned to Haskomb and saw the look returned.

"We have to get out of here," Winters said again. He came to some decision and reached to his waist, grabbing at empty air, then patted, panicking at each time his fingers closed on nothing. He looked around until his eyes fell on Klein's tac-com. Without saying anything he lunged for it.

Reflexively Klein pulled it back, but Winters made another grab. "Give it to me, Lieutenant! We have to get back to the pod."

Klein held out a hand, nearly pushing Winters' face back. "We can't, Captain. Kaige will have the route blocked."

"Kaige?" Winters looked puzzled, and then realization dawned. "Kaige."

"What do you mean?" said one of Alpha's marines, looking between them. In the "Kaige is an Enforcer. They're with us."

"No," Klein shook his head. "Kaige knew what was on this ship, and wanted it enough to use us as bait to catch one."

"*Them?"* Winters demanded, his voice beginning to tremble. "Why would they *want* those things?"

Klein shrugged, feeling strangely calm in this ocean of danger, and powered up the tac-com. "Ours is not to know, Captain." The map confirmed his fears; the direction Alpha ran from was the most direct route to the pods. If Kaige and the Enforcers were indeed the ones who blocked Alpha's retreat they were between the marines and their escape.

"Shit."

Then the thought occurred; that Alpha were to land closest to the ship's prow.

“Captain, which way to the bridge?”

Winters looked confused but hocked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the corridor away from the bodies. Klein orientated the map and expanded the scale until the known shape of the ship displayed, along with their position on it. He could have smiled had the situation not been so dangerous; they were perhaps 200 meters from where the bridge would logically be.

“People, we’re moving,” he said, stowing the com. “We’ll be going fast, but not at the expense of safety, copy? We have two groups out there that want us dead, and I intend to disappoint them both.”

“What’s the plan, Lieutenant?” said Winters, sounding more like himself.

“This is a ship. An alien ship, but still recognizable as one, and that’s means they’ll have some way of communicating from the control room.” He picked his pistol from the floor and checked the action. “Okay? Good. Sergeant?”

Haskomb hefted his shotgun and grinned. “You heard the Lieutenant, group up! Sluzinski; back on point. Lawson, you’re at the back. And keep your bloody ears open, son.”

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THEY were on the move.. Tension gave their steps an urgency which had been absent before. Klein left the tac-com alone, only checking their direction when they reached a junction. Instead he held onto his pistol. An irrational comfort given the amount of firepower around him, but there was nothing that could make him holster it.

They moved quickly, with Klein feeling safer with each step away from the sad encounter with Beta Squad.

Ahead Sluzinski stopped, but did nothing to indicate danger was imminent, just looked around him as if unsure of something.

“What is it, marine?” said Klein.

When Sluzinski didn't answer he moved forward, followed by Winters and Haskomb, and pulled up short just from Sluzinski.

They stood before a room of cavernous proportions. It opened up from the corridor, blossoming out to either side and upwards, eating Sluzinski's light whichever way he directed it.

"Some kind of docking bay," said Winters, staring out into nothing.

Klein checked the com. The bridge was somewhere on the other side of the bay. He looked out into the open space, feeling it sapping what iota of confidence he felt building as they moved towards their goal.

"We need to cross that?" said Winters.

Klein nodded.

"Hell of a tactical problem," said Haskomb. "Still, not point hanging around. We'll skirt the perimeter."

"No," Klein shook his head, "that will just slow us down, and if Kaige guessed we'd come this way he'd be expect ding that. We move across the center."

Winters looked between him, to the yawning blackness and back again, but said nothing and moved back to the squad. Haskomb stepped up to him as he turned.

"You really believe that, sir?"

"About it being unexpected? No, I don't. But rushing may get some of us through, and that's why you're taking this." He unhooked the tac-com from his belt and handed it across. "There's a signal booster uploaded. Find whatever looks like a radio and hail the *Andromeda* when you get there."

"What? No!" Haskomb tried to give the com back.

"That's an order, sergeant. Look, I know you resented being

assigned a green lieutenant. I understand that. You've seen too many battlefields to take orders from some core world boy. But right now all that experience of yours means you're likely to see this out than me." He pushed the com into Haskomb's chest and forced the sergeant's gnarled fingers around it. "Take it and get as many of the boys back as you can."

He looked into Haskomb's eyes, determined to hold them until he saw the order had been understood but had to look away when he saw something he never thought he would; respect.

"Ready." Winters came up behind them, the rest of Theta and what remained of Alpha with him, each Marine's face set with determination.

"Everyone know the plan," said Klein. Every head nodded. "Okay then. I want every quarter covered, we stop for nothing. Understood? Then move out."

They emerged from the confined passage into the corridor, their torches cutting a dozen shafts of light outwards, swinging this way and that, searching for threats. Klein felt the ceiling disappear above him as he moved, feeling oppressed by the abhorrent space around them.

The corridor they exited from disappeared beyond their torch's reach and Klein felt a stab of panic. They were without a point of reference now, a prick of light in a sea of black, and left to the tac-com on Haskomb's belt to keep them on target.

"Movement!"

Before Klein could register who spoke a rifle discharged to his left. Incandescent tracer fire lit up a splayed arc. Without stopping Klein knew the man hit nothing.

"Here!" shouted another.

Klein looked to his right. This time there was no shooting, but there was movement. There, at the fringe of the light, he discerned a lighter grey in a patch of black. A hint of fur and a scaled tail. It

slipped out of sight before he could focus on it, but that there was something there beyond the light could not be denied.

Klein brought his eyes to the front just in time to see one of the Alpha marines bring up his rifle, aim, and be taken in the chest by something swift and fluid. It kept low to the ground as it seethed over the floor. The marine tracked it, bringing his rifle down as he tried to find an aim, but waited too late.

The thing launched before the man fired, vaulting up into the marine's chest. In spite of the alarming speed Klein could make out the rudiments of the attacker. Short, no, compact; a body alternating between matted fur and wrought iron, and a snout like some hunting beast.

It was that snout which did the damage. The marine screamed, whether in frustration or fear Klein would never know, as the thing impacted on his chest. Pincered teeth flashed yellow in the light, then bit down, cutting the scream off at the root as they sliced through jugular and throat.

The attack's momentum continued. The now limp and top-heavy marine crashing backwards. As he hit the floor the thing rolled onward, coming up on padded, claw-tipped feet, before rushing into the shadows on the other side, dragging the body by the helmet as if it weighed nothing.

The whole attack was over before Klein could react, and within three seconds it was as if the marine had never been there. Most of the squad were none the wiser to what just happened, and those that saw bore a dumb look.

"Faster!" Klein shouted.

There was more movement at the edge of the lights. It was like the shadows boiled now. Almost inevitably another small form shot from the roiling mass. This time there was fire, for all it accomplished.

Once more a tailed body jumped, once more a marine was downed, although with the bitter twist that the man was not killed, and

instead dragged into the shadows, baying like a frightened animal and holding out a hand of help that would never come.

Another shape detached itself and came at them. Klein was waiting. His pistol came up, aimed, fired.

A meaty thud impacted, and the thing slid to pulpy halt.

“Move! Now!”

They moved like the testudo formations of ancient Earth. Ringed by light, laser fire lancing out at each hint of movement in the darkness.

Where there was a gap one of the tailed forms raced at the marines, and where one of those bodies came racing, low to the floor, there was fire. The fight was joined and known now. The marines looked for lunges and met them with crossfire, tearing the swarming bodies in two when they came.

By the passing of grills beneath his feet Klein saw they were making progress, and dared a look forward. A wall’s contours emerged from the dark ahead of them, edged dully from their darting torches. They were nearly there.

That was when one of the things landed amongst them. Falling from some unseen ceiling to land with the sharp clack of claw on metal.

Klein saw it land, but was too dumbstruck to fire his pistol before it moved, vaulting onto Captain Winters’ back. Simian like fingers clasped his head, pulling it back with shocking ease, so its curved teeth could sink into his neck.

Klein watched it all in slow motion, feeling as if he were helpless to come to Winters’ help even as he opened his mouth to cry in pain.

The scream brought him round, and alerted others also. The marine behind him turned, cried in alarm and brought his rifle to bear.

“No!” shouted Klein.

The rifle fired a burst. The first shot took the thing in the shoulder, making it release its bite and squeal like a wounded pig. The second the shot cut into the darkness harmlessly. But the third struck another marine in the back of the head.

Like a marionette with its strings cut the man fell without a sound, causing his neighbors to look down, away from their quarters.

That was all the opening the things needed. Bodies swarmed forward into the light at the sudden gap. One marine managed to look up get a shot off, punching one through its open mouth, before others fell on him like a tide. He cried for help, he cried for his mother and then cried no more.

All semblance of order collapsed. Marines on the other side turned to face the new threat to their rear and the mass of writing bodies on their quarter surged forward. Klein gave the only order left.
“Run!”

They broke forward, every man rushing headlong, focused on their own survival.

A weight pulled itself up to Klein’s shoulders, and he felt small hands seek to push his helmet to one side. An image of what happened to Winters flashed through his mind and his hands moved of their own accord; dropping his pistol and reaching over his shoulder. His fingers closed on damp fur and he pulled, throwing a small body over his shoulder.

The smell of damp musk filled his nose as the thing sailed by. The marine to Klein’s front struggled with another of the things clamped to his leg. It scrabbled with tiny, clawed fingers trying to pry apart his leg plate, snapping its teeth in anticipation. The thrown creature barreled into it, sending them both crashing away on the floor. Klein kept moving, grabbed the struggling marine by the arm and hauling him along.

The furred creatures fell away from their rush, seeming to prefer falling upon their side and rear, but leaving the corridor before

them open. One brute, taller and blacker than the rest, stood between them and the exit. It remained unbowed as they neared, hissing with a spitting malevolence and flexing its claws.

Without a break in his stride Haskomb cocked his shot gun, jabbed it forward until it was inches from the thing's face, and fired.

Fur and bone flew in each direction, slapping wetly against Haskomb's breastplate.

It was almost a shock for Klein to realize they were in the corridor now. The creatures massed in the open space beyond the exit, easy prey for their rifles, allowing them to move.

"Keep on! Don't stop for anything!" shouted Haskomb above the continuous torrent of fire.

Klein, weaponless, held onto the marine he rescued. He risked a glance down, seeing the man limped badly and favoring a right leg stained red through his fatigues. It was this looking down, allowing his eyes to concentrate on something other than the chaos around, that told him there was something wrong with the rifle fire. Hidden beneath the rapid, shrieking bursts was a deeper, more definite report. Hours at the practice range gave him an encyclopedic knowledge of the Corporation's arsenal, and he knew that he was hearing weapons his squad did not carry.

The realization struck as he looked up and forward, to see a crumpled patch of black, darker than the shadows around it, on the floor ahead. He did not need to a closer look as they overran it to guess what was happening.

Ahead the corridor split. The right would lead to the bridge. The left was filled with a scene from hell.

Battle raged down the corridor. The creatures were everywhere, leaping, clawing. The floor and ceiling were just another surface to them. And in between and below them; the Enforcers.

Klein was forced to admire how they fought. They twisted faster than he could follow; spinning, weaving, as if to spite their hulking

armor with every move. Blades flashed from their right arms, every one dripping red, cutting and slicing wherever they flew. Heavy pistols followed their heads around, firing sparingly, and impacting with each shot. But for each kill there were another three creatures alive and breathing and throwing themselves forward.

What struck Klein the most was the silence of it all. There was the swish of blade and clacking scurry of claws on metal, but the Enforcers made not a sound. No war cries, nor cursed oaths. They fought and they died with silent efficiency.

It was obvious that this was where their trap was laid. To lure the marines into the open, bring out the creatures and secure a specimen. He could have smiled at his hunter's new role, were they not dying so quickly.

"Right, now!" He began dragging the other marine with him, seeing a locked bulkhead just meters away.

"Klein!"

He turned. He did not have a choice. His name was roared with a natural authority that the soldier in him near saluted. He looked, and saw the hulking form of Kaige, pounding his way through the carnage, swinging his arms left and right, juggernauting all the creatures from his path.
"Klein!"

"Faster!" he shouted.

Kaige came on. A slash with his blade and shot with his pistol and he was free, gaining speed. The floor shook with each pounding step.

Klein focused on the bulkhead to their front. If they could get to the other side and close it... his heart fell. It was a double-doored airlock, necessitating the first door to close before second could be opened. An easy enough maneuver in itself, made complicatedly time consuming by a large group carrying their injured.

Klein looked back at Kaige's incoming form.

“Give me your weapon,” he said to the marine at his side.

The man passed the rifle over and Klein handed his arm to another soldier, stopped running, and checked the magazine.

“Go!”

Haskomb pulled up, seeing Klein turn.

“Sergeant, you have orders.”

Klein’s attention was too focused on the oncoming Enforcer to see how the command was taken, but was pleased when Haskomb ran on with the squad.

That left him, and Kaige.

He slammed the magazine home and shouldered the rifle.

In the weapon’s torch he saw Kaige’s teeth flash in a wicked grin.

“You should have listened, Lieutenant. You could have gone a long way.”

Klein took aim, unsure if the rifle would even penetrate Kaige’s armor.

“I’m going all the way to Declan Five, Kaige. That’s far enough for me.”

Kaige’s laughter matched the relish in his eyes for the coming slaughter. He swept his blade through the air in a practiced swing. Klein narrowed his gaze, sighting down the barrel and trying to draw a line on Kaige’s face when the largest creature Klein had yet seen took Kaige in the side.

It slammed into Kaige’s shoulder, coming headlong from a side corridor, and crumpling Kaige’s arm into his side. Klein winced reluctantly at the wet snap of cartilage breaking.

The thing was huge. Easily as big as Kaige's armor, and heavy enough to pin the Enforcer to the wall.

Kaige turned his head to face his attacker, tried to move and bared his teeth in pain and he struggled against his broken arm. The thing was playing with him. All the other attacks had been designed to kill or capture, dragging marines into the darkness for purposes unknown. But here, in front of Klein, he saw this monster of a beat seeming to play with its prey.

It leaned in, and its snout quaked as it sniffed Kaige's face.

Kaige pushed once more, failed once more, and spat into the creature's vast mouth.

It blinked jet black eyes, nonplussed in a surprisingly human way, and then roared a bass bellow, splattering saliva and mucus across Kaige's face.

For his part, the look of determined hatred never left Kaige's face, not even when the beast pulled back its arm and drove forward a drill the size of Klein's body.

It bit into Kaige's size, cutting through steel and armor, discharging smoke and sparks, until the grinding became vilely wet. Kaige shook in his armor, emitting stuttering grunts, but never screaming, until the creature pulled hard on the drill, yanking it free in a spray, and Kaige fell still.

The creature turned its head to Klein.

He ran. Dropped the useless rifle, turned, and sprinted back down the corridor. He was both relieved and horrified to see the squad were still pushing themselves into the airlock, squeezing each body in, unwilling to split the squad without knowing what would meet them on the other side.

Haskomb was still outside, pushing with one hand, yelling orders to get in when he heard Klein's pounding boots and looked up. He saw Klein, then looked passed him and went pale.

“Get in!” shouted Klein. But Haskomb didn’t. He gave another heave, forcing a marine with a bloody ear further into the press, then turned.

Klein didn’t see the fist which Haskomb threw, but felt himself disjoint from consciousness as it connected. He fell into the space Haskomb just made, then felt something pushed hard into his gut.

His vision swam into focused to find the tac-com re-hooked on his belt. He looked up to see Haskomb looking grim, and behind him the outlined form of the creature as it scrambled up the corridor towards them.

“No,” was all he managed.

Haskomb gave him a curt, final nod, and then hit the release. The door slid closed, swishing centimeters from Klein’s nose, and giving him one last look of the Sergeant as he turned towards the beast, cocking his shotgun.

“No!”

There was a gun shot. The door shook with a violent impact, and then all went quiet.

“No,” he whispered.

The door behind them slid open, triggered by the closing of the first, and they all nearly fell backward. Some retained enough sense to take up defensive positions, covering them from potential attack. But none came.
Klein had guessed right. This was obviously a bridge, although one of alien design. Organic looking control panels filled the walls, facing seats molded for smaller bodies than the marines.

He ordered the marines to disable the door controls and secure the entrance for a defensive fight. Only then did he check the tac-com, and he could have cried. The comms app flashed, showing a weak signal between it and the Incisor, connecting to the pod through the hull.

And if he could access the pod's comms through the tac-com…

"Come in *Andromeda Star. Andromeda Star,* this is Lieutenant Klein."

Nothing. Klein's heart sank, then the unit crackled into life. *"Copy Lieutenant Klein, this is Andromeda Star. What is your situation?"*

Klein did not answer immediately. He rested his head against his wrist and thanked any god left for this deliverance.

"Request immediate extraction, *Andromeda.* Squads Alpha through Gamma are dead, repeat, squads Alpha through Gamma are dead. Captain Winters and Kaige too. We have," he did a count," eight requiring extraction with wounded. Copy?"

"*Copy that. One moment, Lieutenant."* And the line went dead.

"What the hell was that?" said a marine. But before Klein could answer the radio sparked on again.

"This is Commander Kamry. Lieutenant Klein, are you there?"

"Commander, this is Klein," he said with relief. "Immediate extraction is requested. Do you copy that?"

"Lieutenant, what is your situation. Where is Captain Winters?"

"Dead, they're all dead."

A pause. "*What about Kaige?"*

"Dead. It was a set up, Commander. We were attacks by these… *things.* Kaige knew they were here and used Captain Winters for bait. They're all dead, Commander. Everyone but us."

Another pause, more telling than the last. *"I'm very sorry to hear that, Lieutenant."*

"I appreciate the thought, Commander, but just please launch extraction pods."

"I'm afraid I can't do that." The line went quiet for a moment, and in his mind's eye Klein saw Kamry entering launch codes into a console which had nothing to do with Incisor pods.

"You knew," he said. It was not a question.

"If it is any consolation you and your men have done a service to SLA Industries, and your deaths will be recorded as heroic ones for the cause. You're a hero, Lieutenant. Congratulations."

The line cut out.

He stared into the tac-com, at the blinking red aerial of the terminated connection, then up at his men. In turn, they all looked at him. Fear and hope were evident on some faces, but all bore the trust that he, as their officer, would get them home.

He closed his eyes, unable to meet their gazes, and could almost hear the descending note of incoming ordnance.

"I'm sorry," was all he could say.

THE END

For more stories like this, visit Michael's blog at
www.michaelgrey.com.au

The Last Guards: Dropzone

by Aaron Leahy—"Sardonic Wolf"

War. We were told it would make us heroes, when really they should have said martyrs. Three weeks of fighting for our survival, in this hell hole, with the constant threat of enemy bombardments. It's maddening. Yet still, we battled on, never knowing when, or if, our end would come. Fighting for the greater good against unprecedented forces, fighting until the last man. At least it we were fighting the good fight. The way we were taught.

Transmission ends…

Day 24

*Our last contact was three moons ago, since then we've lost too many good marines to the enemy onslaught. We can't hold out much longer, Sworn to protect the last city hall from the enemies that would see us become extinct. Protect the civilians they said, they were all ready dead. Still we fight on. The wounded and dead lay stricken on the cold rotting floors of this barren place. *We lost our last medic yesterday there's no hope for them, surely there's hope in here for us somewhere in here. There has to be.*
-Jackson. A

The marine regiment D- section 17 better known as the Youth Corp, notorious for rushing training and recruits into their first battles for the proper experience. They were dispatched to Plantania 3 months ago with one purpose protect the planet's last base from the veer-myn that now inhabit the planet, foul creatures that live in their underground pits venturing out to bring destruction upon the great empire. Growing in numbers daily the youth corp are Planet Alpha's last hope.

24 days earlier…

'**Approaching landing zone, prepare to disembark ETA 10 minutes**' sounded out over the intercom.

Sergeant Jackson knew those 10 minutes well, he readied his equipment one final time he gripped the straps that held his frame in, bracing himself for the battle that lay ahead.

' ETA 9!'

He stared at his men, they weren't combat ready, youngsters hurried through training to feed the growing gaps in the corporations dwindling forces. They weren't men most still looked like boys some hadn't even had their first shave. Many sat hunched in anticipation of their first battle, the last for most. But this separated the men from the boys. Jackson learned that the hard way he lost all his friends back on Vermyian, he learned fast. 15 years of service and he was finally promoted to sergeant. This was his first in command.

'ETA 8!'

'ETA 7'
Jackson place his head against the head rest and ran over his orders once more in his head. Hold the city hall for 3 days and nights till the real battle begins, give the civilians time to escape and the corporation to send the Battleship Armada and it's armies that lived within. He could do that, couldn't he? The hall was well defended two entry points, he remembered that from his last trip. Over watch positions on all entry's and a bunch of recruits, Simple orders stand and shoot they couldn't be shot back at quick enough. They could manage that.

'ETA 6!'

'ETA 5!'

Jackson knew that today he could finally prove what he was made of, the true marine that he really was, with being in someone else's shadow. He was used to that stuck in the shadow of those above him never receiving the credit he deserved. Now it was his chance to bask in the glory, his glory of his first victory and the homecoming that would follow, for once he would be the Hero.

'ETA 4!"

'ETA 3!'
Jackson look at corporal Strider, he pass training with full marks the first to do so in years yet he sat there mumbling, the redness around his eyes suggested he'd been crying, Jackson remembered his first trip and the tears of fears that stained his mind again and again, thrown from battle to battle, he knew this time too well and it's effect. The lack of sleep, the nightmares that drive a solider crazy, he hadn't slept properly in years, it was the same every night unless he drunk, but he hated the stench that remained on him after.

'ETA 2!'

'ETA 1!'
He closed his eyes for the final minute, he always did. He remembered home, the winding streets layer upon layer of streets and Anya, How he missed her, 3 months already he promised he'd take leave when he returned to be there for the birth of the twins, Her sweet smile, he smiled just thinking of it. He loved her, he truly did. One day they would marry for sure. He saw her turn away and he opened his eyes.

'Prepare for landing, Landing in 3,2,1!'

The blast doors opened and the light poured in, the glare blinded them all then they saw what awaited them…

And Now a Word from Our Sponsors

by Michael Grey

"And welcome back to this Confederacy Cup match up between the Oorte Cloud Raiders and the Ikean Flat Packers. The game stands at 5-3 to the Raiders, with the Flat Packers struggling to hold on. You're with Gerry Arnholt and myself, Tom Phelps. Gerry, this is turning in one heck of a game here, wouldn't you say?"

"You got that right, Tom. Remember; we're in playoff season here, and whoever loses this one is gone. And in the case of the Raiders, that could mean forever with them being the only team to be a legitimised pirate crew. I don't think the fans of these particular marauders would welcome their team back if they lose to the Ikeanese."

"Whoa there Gerry! I should point out here that those were Gerry's own, personal opinions and do not reflect those of the Dread League, Channel 799, Ropa Cola or, er, me."

"Just expressing the word on the street there, Tom, no need to start sweating. Ha, ha."

"Ha, ha indeed Gerry. But enough of that, the players are back on the field, and blow me if the glass on the booth here isn't rattling with the howl of the crowd!"

"That's right, Gerry. It's a sell-out crowd tonight of 250,000 at the Draconis Dome. The only stadium which would allow the fans of alleged pirates which follow an alleged pirate team in, even though all alleged cases were dropped against them."

"It truly is a sight to behold, Tom. Let's go down to our friendly Judwan on the spot, Abe, for more on the mood on the pitch. Abe?"

"We Have Been Over This On More Than One Occasion, Gerald. My Proper Name Is AbuyB'drjjidgbag-"

“We know that, Abe, but unless we want to go to commercial we’ll stick with Abe.”

“Even So, I Would Like It Noted-“

“Mind on the job, good buddy.”

“Yes, Well. Unfortunately Due To The Woeful Inadequacy Of Your Language I Will Have To Settle For ‘Tense’ To Describe The Feeling On The Field. The Stress Is Beginning To Show With The Coaches Also. I Asked Coach Martin Of The Flat Packers How He Would Come Back From Being Behind For A Full Quarter. He Suggested I Leave And Fornicate Myself With A Stick. A Most Vulgar Man I-”

“We’ll have to leave you there Abe, because the players are taking their places ready for play.”

“I’ll say it again, Tom; looking at them side by side I don’t know how the Ikeanese can hold their own against these marauders. The humans must want this game bad just to be trailing by one at this point.”

“That’s right, Gerry. The Flat Packers are obviously still haunted from just missing out on the finals last year, and the players and fans are out for blood.”

“And the players are in position, with the two line backers eyeing each other over the centre circle. Up steps the referee, out fires the ball and play begin-Oh! Well, you did say the fans wanted blood, Gerry, but I think they would have preferred some of the Raider’s.”

“Too right, Tom. That right there is a perfect example of why it’s not just the players who have to be quick on their feet. But the ball’s in play as the medics drag the body off and a replacement referee runs out.”

“And he’s going to be needed, Gerry. That ball is being passed from one Ikeanese hand to another like its red hot. The Flat Packers are sticking to their plan of fast hands which has seen them cling to this game by a knife edge.”

“It really is beautiful Dreadball, Tom. But for all their speed, the humans still can’t get by the Raider’s defence. They’re going to have to take some chances if they’re going to score before the break.”

“It looks like they heard you down on the pitch, Gerry. Frank *‘Handlebar’* Tolson is making a break for an opening in the Raider’s line, and- Ooh! He slides off number nine, Grocth *‘The Knife’,* as if he’s covered in butter.”

“Nice simile, Tom. And Tolson is still up and running. He shimmies between numbers 17 and 20, Dok ‘*Forceps’* and ‘*Driver*’ Robb’n. Some quick feet there, and now he’s in the open field! He’s got the ball, with only Grabber ‘*Grab*’ Grabson between him and the goal! He jinks left! Dodges right! Back left, and- Oooh...”

“That’s an unexpectedly creative approach to the rules there, Gerry.”

“That’s right, Tom. The book says to keep contact below the neck, but that applies to the plane of the physical body rather than the planet’s lateral sphere. Holding a player upside down by the ankles and using his head as a punch bag still constitutes a penalty.”

“That’s a good point, Gerry, and one I think Grabson will remember as the referee blows his whistle for the break.”

“Both teams head for the tunnel with their heads held high. It’s three to five for the Oorte Cloud Raiders, but the Ikean Flat Packers are still very much in the game. We’ll talk more on this after these messa-“

**click **

hsssssssss
“...the only cream guaranteed to regrow limbs...”

click
crackhsssss

“...one of these days Alice; Bang! Zoom! Straight to the moon!”

“Which moon?”

“I dunno… Titan!”

hsssssssss

“...nd welcome back! That was some half time show, right Tom?”

“You got that right, Gerry. Those stripper bots were really grinding those poles.”

“Yes they were. Of course it helps when you have an industrial grinder for a parent.”

“And that roar your hearing is the crowd as the teams come out of the tunnel. Let’s go back to our Judwan on the spot, Abe. Abe; what have you got for us, good buddy?”

“You Know, I Do Believe Sometimes You Place A Further Inflection On My Name Which Denigrates Me Even Further Than Your Refusal To Use my Full Title. Furtherm-”

“Time’s a factor here, Abe.”

“Yes, Well. I Believe It Is Safe To Assume Both Teams Believe They Can Still Win This Brutally Under-Evolved Contest Of Appendage Sizing. I Attempted To Speak To Coach Hrakk Of The Oorte Cloud Raiders, However He Insisted I Leave Him Alone In No Uncertain Terms, And Continued To Question Both My Maternal And Paternal Parentage. The Frightful Beast Did Not Even Allow Me To Explain That My Kind Do Not Have Parents In The Normal Sense, Rather We Are Spawned From A Clutch Of Three Females And Then The Eggs Are Fertilised By All The Males In The Tribe, Thus Taking Full Advantage Of The Genet-”

“Whoa there, Abe. It’s a little early in the evening to go into that. Children are still watching, buddy.”

“And there’s no time anyway as the players once more take their positions.”

“You’re on the ball Gerry, and it looks like the replacement referee learned from his predecessor’s mistakes and has stepped a few metres back before the ball fires out, and game on! There’s no clear winner as the contested ball skids between hands, rolling free, and is picked up by the Flat Packer’s number 18, Lance ‘*The Mower’* Phimmel!”

“That was a demonstration of sure hands there, Tom, and it looks like Phimmel is breaking from the Flat Packer’s tactics which have seen them this far, and is going in solo.”

“You have to wonder at the wisdom of that, Gerry. The smallest marauder on the Raider’s team has a clear 50 kilos on Phimmel.”

“That’s a point to remember, Tom, but I think Phimmel’s forgotten or just plain doesn’t care, as he picks out the Raider’s biggest player, Hokk ‘*The Hammer*’, and makes a bee line straight for him.”

“Hokk holds the season record for dismemberments, Gerry. I can’t see this ending well for Phimmel.”

“I don’t think he’s heard you, Tom. Phimmel’s picking up speed, and Hokk’s cracking his knuckles in expectation.”

“I don’t know if I can watch another one of these, Gerry.”

“I’m with you, buddy, but wait! Phimmel’s gone into a slide! He’s on the ground, feet first, straight under *The Hammer’s* grab and between his legs! Phimmel completes the slide and is up and running behind the Raider’s defence!”

“That was one ballsy move, Gerry. Luckily for Phimmel it worked, and look at *The Hammer*! He followed Phimmel all the way through his legs until he fell literally head over heels!”

“I suppose it’s true what they say, Tom; the hammer’s not the sharpest tool in the box.”

“Ha ha, good one Gerry. Phimmel’s in the open, with no one to stop him! Surely he can’t miss from this range... Goal! It’s 4-4!

Phimmel puts the Flat Packers back into the game!"

"Is that a cruiser taking off or is that the crowd, Tom? The Flat Packer's fans have gone wild!"

"That's right, Tom. The Ikeanese end of the stadium has erupted, and it's all play for with just four rushes left."

"And unfortunately we have to leave Channel 799 now. The Flat Packer's held out much longer than we expected, right Gerry?"

"You're not wrong there, Tom. Join us on Channel 800 to continue watching what will surely be one of the matches of this season. Next up on Channel 799; 'Days of Our Lives'. Can Ridge and Bridge-bot patch things up… again? Stay tuned to find out."

click

hsssssssss

The Wiley Old Man Returns

by Lee Montgomery (SecuraCorp)

"*Welcome Back Ladies and Gentlemen to this Nexus 3 Vidcast of the concluding round of the Peripheral Territory Series Tour, LIVE from beautiful Creshtus Minor!*

"*Beautiful might be pushing it a bit, Kev...*"

"*As it stands right now Dina, things are looking grim for the SecuraCorp Lawmen, trailing by two to the Cretan Horns and in desperate need of this Cup win if they hope to make the PTS Play-offs.*"

"*You said it Kev, the Lawmen had really seemed to come alive in the early goings of the tournament, but now find themselves really struggling to keep pace with Cretan. A far cry off from the days when the old black, grey and gold of SecuraCorp used to always sit on top of the standings tables*"

"*OH! Another clanger from Wiggins, that's what, three missed Strikes in this game? I tell ya' Dina, I think the game has finally passed him by...*"

"*Yeah, but that shot was a fair bit harder than the earlier ones, not nearly as wide open either...*"

The roar of the crowd, the contrast of the deep, dark Neodurium with the flashing lights of the arena and the thick smell of sweat and blood pervading through it all. This is what Wiggins lived for, or at least, he used to. Wiggins found himself scrambling back to mid-pitch, trying to regroup his team and recover from yet another unforced error. His breathing was getting ragged. It had been a hard fought tournament and his aging and injury-riddled body, modified or not, was starting to catch up to him.

All these cycles on the scene and where had it got him? Wiggins had once been a revered athlete, an icon on countless worlds. Wealth, women, fame....he had had it all and then some. But those days were long behind him. Here he was in some backwater, far removed from his glory days, long though they were. Even as he

had aged, he had still been adored, was still able to cut it with the 'young 'ens'. His combination of genetically enhanced athleticism and vast playing experience had earned him the moniker of “The Wiley Old Man”. Season after season he found ways to do the unthinkable and wow the masses long past what should have been his prime. His late game heroics would leave announcers shouting that “The Wiley Old Man is Back At it Today!” Affectionately, fans turned the popular phrase into an acronym, and thus “The Wombat” was born.

However, it had been many seasons since Wiggins had heard that nickname, not since “THE MATCH.” That fateful night saw him not only cost his team the championship, but also resulted in his exile to the minors.

And thus began a long slide into obscurity.

“*Horns looking to exploit this turnover into some points, Minoa “The Bull” in at Keeper, “punts” the ball clear...”*

“*You know, I just think the Lawmen need some new blood. Why, I can't remember a time when Wiggins wasn't playing DreadBall, can you Dina? Even I grew up watching him play! Maybe it's finally time he hung it up...”*

“*Z-Nac for the Horns has the ball, deep in Lawmen territory now. Only one man to beat!”*

“*Oh No! Xantau—the Lawmen Keeper-- bites on the outside move!”*

“*He sure did, looks like Z-Nac has an unobstructed route to the Strike Zone....”*

“*Sure does, and looks like he's going in deep for the sure thing...”*

Perhaps this is how it would end for him. Playing in some minor league series on an obscure planet. Why had he let it come to this? He could have went out on top, could have had it all! Wiggins should have been even bigger than that prima donna van Dien—why, even that joker “The Hatchet” had his own ad-vids for O'Squirrely's! One mistake, one bad decision and his career, or what

was left of it, had become a mess. His legacy forgotten.

"*SsssTRIIIIIIIIIIIKE! That's a 3-pointer from right-up close!"*

"*A Keeper just can't let himself get beat like that..."*

"*Yes, but when your teammates keep turning the ball over, the oppositions scoring opportunities increase, the shots start adding up. It takes a toll ..."*

But then, if he was gonna go out now, even in obscurity, Wiggins was going to go down swinging. Maybe he could muster up just one more flourish, just one more night of heroics to bask in the adulation, however small it may be and remember what it was like all those cycles ago. Maybe he had just a little magic still left in the tank after all.

"*Double Back!"* Wiggins shouted. In spite of the aching in his muscles and the screaming of his lungs, he forced himself into action. *"Xantau!"* He bellowed, *"Inside-Out! Don't give up the inside lanes, force 'em to the wall!"*

Xantau nodded his large helm in acknowledgment , the gold markings of the Lawmen glittering in the flashing lights of the packed arena, and quickly took up position at the top of the center Strike Zone.

"*Well, that really puts SecuraCorp on the ropes, down by 5 now..."*

"*There goes the restart!"*

" *That ball is really humming now, look at it go!*

"*You know, the ball gets up to such high speeds and comes off the walls at such odd angles at times that it has periodically led to accusations of tampering…*

"*Which, of course, is ludicrous Dina! With an organization designed to promote and protect fair-play (and bottom-lines) in place like the DGB, how could any kind of such shenanigans take place? I mean, if we can't trust the integrity of professional sports, what kind of worlds would we*

be living on?!?"

"*Oh my Kev! Looks like Migmer just took that ball straight away from Bienez! Good thing Wiggins seems to have gotten the Lawmen in some type of defensive formation..."*

"*He has always had quite the instinct for anticipating the flow of a game, so much so in fact, that some have even accused him of being psychic…*

"*He would just say experienced!"*

The opposing Jack lurched forward with ball-in-glove and rumbled toward the central Strike Zone. Clearly, the Horns were looking to put the Lawmen away with a game-sealing 3-point Strike. Wiggins was having none of it and was in a full-out sprint across the pitch, feet furiously pounding the Neodurium (TM) to head off the attack. He passed behind Xantau, who was setting up hard inside on the incoming assault of their Strike Zone.

"*Looks like Migmer has support to the outside, but look at Wiggins go! He is really flying!"*

"*Don't forget Kev, Wiggins played Striker for many a season before moving into the Jack role..."*

"*Xantau is coming up hard inside, Migmer tries to dodge...and...NOTHING DOING! WOW! What a hit, the ball is loose!"*

"*That's how a Keeper gets it done Kev!"*

"*That a boy Xan!" cried Wiggins. He accelerated toward the loose ball that was careening toward the wall, attempting to head off Z-Nac, the Horns Striker that had been running in support of Migmer.*

With a last burst of effort, Wiggins hurled himself into the wall, solidly planting one foot on it and pushing off hard back toward the way he came. He deftly scooped up the ball in his glove on the rebound before Z-Nac could react.

"*Bienez, CATCH!"* shouted Wiggins. And in one smooth movement

he stepped forcefully in toward the middle of the pitch and flung the ball to his Striker awaiting at the center line.

"*I ain't seen a move like that in awhile! A rebound scoop!?! Now that's old-school!"*

"*That's what you get with Wiggins, some old-fashioned, hard-nosed DreadBall"*

"*Looks like the Lawmen are making a play here, they've got three in the middle and look to be going deep..."*

"*They sure are, must be aiming for a three-pointer, they really have the Horns on the run now scrambling for position...."*

"*They work the ball left, now right and...No! They off-load back to Wiggins coming up fast behind!"*

"*He is charging hard into the right Strike Zone..."*

"*Here's the shot..."*

"*STRIKE!"*

"*Wow, that one really had some zip!"*

"*The ball is out on the restart and Man-o-Man has Cretan found themselves out of position here!"*

"*Quite right! They really got taken on that last play and over committed deep on that one"*

"*It's Wiggins with the ball again, the Lawmen have regained possession..."*

"*Looks like this one could get interesting after all!"*

Wiggins had the ball and was quickly moving his team into position.

"*Support right, RIGHT!"* he yelled. Wiggins hurled the titanium orb

out to Bienez and drifted back towards the center of the pitch. The Horns were in a tizzy as they tried to regroup and press the attack after being caught out of alignment. They launched another full on assault to try and bring an end to the Lawmen possession.

Which, of course, is exactly what Wiggins wanted.

"*NOW! LOOPY-LEFT! NOW!"* Wiggins bellowed.

"*Wiggins offloads to Bienez, looks like they are taking it right..."*

"*Horns trying to regroup and boy are they putting on a full out press here..."*

"*UH OH! Bienez hits a wide open Wiggins at center-pitch and he's making a bee-line for the top of the left Strike Zone!"*

Wiggins' legs were churning at full-tilt as he approached the glowing tiles that marked his destination. He pulled up slightly and leapt into the air from the top of the zone....

"*Is that a Jump-shot?!?"*

"*STRIKE! A 2-pointer!"*

"*It was! I haven't seen a jump shot like that in 15 cycles!"*

"*Wiggins is really on the move!"*

"*He might not be the fastest, but he sure was a step ahead of them on that rush!"*

" *I dare say it, Dina, The Wiley Old Man is Back at it Today!"*

The crowd was starting to work it's way into a frenzy and the chanting was starting to grow.

"***WOM-BAT! WOM-BAT! WOM-BAT!"***

Wiggins felt a new surge of adrenaline flow through his body. There was no way they were going to lose now.

"*Is it going to be enough Kev? The Lawmen are still down by two and time is running out!"*

"*Let's just see what The Wombat brings to the table..."*

The glowing mass of titanium came hurling down the centerline, but again, Wiggins was a step ahead of everyone else, having already anticipated were the ball would end up.

"*WOW! Again, that uncanny 6th sense of The Wombat has given the Lawmen one more rush to work with here..."*

"*Two will tie and Three will win, what do you think they are going to do here Kev?"*

"*Hard to say with The Wombat back in form, but I'd wager Wiggins will go for the win.."*

"*Looks like Cretan has reformed a 5-man screen and again are looking to pressure here"*

"*Looks like The Bull has planted himself in front of the central Strike Zone"*

Wiggins made the call to attack, *"4 Wide!"*. Wiggins bolted down the middle of the pitch, his team mates running flat in support and wide on either side.

"*Looks like their keeping them stretched across the pitch here..."*

"*Here it comes, Bienez is looping in behind Wiggins..."*

Wiggins deftly tossed the ball back to Bienez and continued bolting toward the central Strike Zone.

"*What's this, the old "Slam and Jam play?!?"*

"*Well, most people aren't old enough to remember that Wiggins started out as a Guard when he was a rookie.."*

"*But we're talking about Minoa The Bull in at Keeper here, those horns aren't just for decoration!"*

"*Well, remember that they are curved inward a bit and don't point directly forward. Not to mention the official DGB statement that "potentially dangerous, uncovered appendages are sprayed with a clear, non-staining, synthi-wax protective polyment to ensure the safety of all participants...."*

Wiggins could smell the pungent musk of The Bull, who snorted in disgust and was stamping his hoof-like feet in agitation. Mind you, Minoa looked in no way like a Terran Bull. Except for the horns. And the raging temperament.

"*Think you're tough? Come get some, you big heifer!"* Shouted Wiggins. Minoa bellowed in rage and began racing forward to meet the Jack head on.

"*Wiggins looks to be attempting to clear the way for Bienez..."*

"*This looks like it's going to be a violent collision!"*

"*The crowd is loving it!"*

Wiggins lowered his shoulder. Minoa put his head down and came on at full speed. Right at the moment of impact, Minoa launched himself, along with a vicious right hook, straight at The Wombat's head.

"*OH! Here it comes!"*

Just as the meaty fist of Minoa was to make contact with Wiggins' jaw, he spun away from the blow, rolling back along the mighty outstretched arm of the Cretan Keeper.

"*Wiggins is hi-NO! He spins clear! Minoa crumples in a heap!"*

"*What a whiff!"*

"*The Wombat wheels back in toward the middle of the pitch.."*

“*NOW!”* called Wiggins, as he sprinted straight into the heart of the glowing mass of tiles that was the Horns central Strike Zone. Bienez lobbed a soft toss over the furious outstretched mess of fur that was The Bull. In one smooth motion, Wiggins caught the ball then immediately leapt and spun it forward at the shimmering target....

“*Only seconds left...”*

“*Wiggins with the ball...”*

“*He shoots...”*

“*STRIKE! A 3-pointer at the buzzer! What a match!”*

“*The Lawmen win!”*

“*Looks like The Wombat is back to boot!”*

Wiggins felt a renewal of purpose, a sense of clarity that he hadn't had for a long time. The crowd was going wild. His teammates were shouting in exultation. Maybe, just maybe, if he led this team back to the TPS Championship, and if he got the right sponsor, just maybe, he could get that DGB restriction lifted.

Wiggins was back, and this time, The Wombat was going out on top.

On HIS terms.

Lazarus

by Michael Grey

It was already dark outside. Either his timing was out or the Ministry had diverted power from the Lowside's day cycle to the Upside for their hot tubs and flyers. Almost certainly the latter, though he was not one to trust in probabilities.

In the scheme of things, however, it did not matter. He left the store, stepping over detritus left by the latest drain backup as if it were full light. Gangs already populated the streets, drawn from their holes by the promise of darkness. He crossed to the road's middle, walking equilaterally between groups on either side, ignoring and in turn ignored. It was too early for them to a bother a lone man, even if he did carry bags of food. It would still be hours before the first shots rang through Lowside.

He reached his building, its side only slightly spattered with lit windows. The rest resident to those who couldn't afford the power, or were too stupid or too wasted to steal it. Home. For the present.

The lobby door was off the hook, giving the hookers a warmer place to wait for the next trick. One crooked a knotted finger at him, more exhausted than alluring. He walked past, ignoring the bones prominent on her shoulders and the damp patches on her shirt.

For the briefest of moments he considered reaching into his bag and giving her a can of beans or potted meat. Something to help. But it was only for a moment. It would be gone before he reached the apartment; pawned for another hit of whatever her particular poison was, and then she would follow him around like a spurned dog, waiting for the next kick.

No. He did not need the attention.

The steps were climbed two at a time for nine flights, until he stood on his landing. As dark and dank as he left it that morning. Rust still ate through the welded wall sheets. The EMERGENCY EXIT sign sparked where an illegal hook-up bled power from the grid, its

ozone mixing with the mildewed carpet to give this floor its particular odour.

Down the corridor, brown water compressing from the carpet where his boots trod, he paused just slightly halfway, leg mid-swing. To the casual observer it would barely be noticed, and he was on his way again within a beat.

While he was still three metres away the door unlocked in a solid clack with no external action from him, and swung open without the need to shift his hands from the grocery bags, swinging shut behind his heel.

Inside, the apartment was all dark shapes and grey outlines, benefiting only slightly from what halogens filtered through the lone window. He walked on surely, never brushing against the mouldy furniture, to the kitchen. The bags were placed on the counter and cupboards opened, all in a darkness most would find impossible.

“Hello, Lazarus,” said a female voice.

“You’re good,” he said, still placing the cans according to food type. “Relocking the door would have been particularly complicated. And that was some nice work on the alarms, although you missed the tertiary. So, with all that I would have to guess…” he placed the last can from one bag and turned, leaning against the countertop and facing the woman. “Agency?”

She sat in the easy chair. The only one in the apartment. Low, its zigzag thread worn smooth on the seat and back, and angled to where the occupant could see the window and door simultaneously. The choice was tactical, and told him as much as her ability to break past his alarms.

She nodded. “We have met, Agent Lazarus, although not in person.”

He cocked his head, “Miss Dancer?”

She nodded again, short and precise, much like the rest of her. Her

business suit was understated but immaculate, and her hair was pulled back to a strand-perfect bun. He could imagine her dusting the chair before she sat in it. “I apologise for disturbing your sabbatical, but I’m afraid something has come up.”

“Something always does.”

“I know you will appreciate just how important this is if we came for you. You are not the easiest person to find. You choose some interesting places for your safaris.”

He kept his eyes on her the whole time, unblinking, gathering. She had remained still so far, legs crossed at the knee, fingers interlaced casually on her abdomen. Her body language gave off quiet confidence. But the signs were there; a tension across her lips as she spoke, the minor tick of a forefinger. She was nervous, and whatever she was here for was important enough to see him in person. And his augments said she was disconnected from the net. Interesting…

He looked out of the window where the evening’s first gunshots began to pepper the night. “I like to keep things engaging. Act incorrectly and the Lowside can be as dangerous as any jungle. And I have to make myself scarce, otherwise someone always turns up to cut things short.”

“*You* are a member of the Council Protection Agency, Lazarus. You are ours to call on as we need.”

“Perhaps next time I’ll find a nice quiet asteroid. That should keep you away for a while longer.”

“Agent you will listen, or would you prefer stasis containment until you remember your prerogatives?”

He looked at her, locking eyes until it was obvious she would not look away, and nodded.

“Good,” she said. “Now, what do you know about Agent Caspar?”

His memory broke into action, retrieving the information as he spoke. “Caspar, Silus, M. Notional rank; Captain. Effective rank; Lieutenant Commander. Height; 186. Skin, hair and eye tone; variable. Last known sphere of operations; the Outer Perseus Arm. Mission aim; Classified.”

“That is correct. Do you know Agent Caspar at all?”

“On a limited basis. We never worked together.”

“Are you aware of his training and abilities?”

He paused, as much to run a search on his memory as wonder what she was getting at. “Only what’s listed,” he said eventually. “Why?”

“We need you to kill him.”

And suddenly the net isolation was understandable.

“You want me to kill one of CPA’s, one of our own, agents?”

“Hunt and kill, yes.” His ocular vision sprung up with a handshake request from Miss Dancer, indicating she had files to share. “What you’re receiving now is an order of magnitude above *top secret*, and I do not need to describe the penalties for divulging this information.”

He accepted the handshake and his peripheral vision swam with overlapping images, documents and recordings. A cascade of data, too much for even him to take in in one glance. A word was made known to him, *Iapteus*. The mention of his triggered an awareness, like someone turning on the lights in a dark room. *Iapteus* was a security level, and it being known showed a ladder of similar codewords below; *Atlas, Prometheus, Astraeus*, all the way down to *Top Secret.*

The data stream brought with it some halting images. One was a pic file of someone he recognised as Agent Caspar, laying on a surgical slap, seemingly alive and unconcerned while his head rested in the centre of a round machine, the size and complexity of

a super-collider cross section.

The second was a vid file. A tank, reinforced to hold the super heavy med gel it contained. Inside a shape, just on the other side of definable, floated, held static by tubes and wires. It shook once in a while, through the external stimulus of whatever the tubes brought or some reaction to its situation, Lazarus did not know. Although he suspected if it were the latter the image would take on a degree of the sinister.

His mind parsed the data and offered him a short prognosis, with a full report to go over later at leisure. He took the prognosis, read it, blinked, and looked questioningly at Dancer. She nodded.

“The project is so secret it does not even have a name.” She noticed one of the chair’s few remaining loose threads had attached itself to her sleeve. She pulled it free, held it to the light, then tossed it away, shaking her hand as if it might have contaminated her. “Its purpose was twofold. Firstly, for situations where an agent may need to be in two places at once, and for whatever reason a gene-level disguised proxy would not be enough. Secondly, where the survival of an agent was assessed to be less than likely, and their replacement too costly.”

“I understand. Is the copy implanted in the new body or the original?”

“The original mind state always resides in the original body, Agent Lazarus. It avoids any potential… errors to proliferate.”

“Errors?” An eyebrow raised at the pause.

Miss Dancer’s mouth curled in a smile which went nowhere near her eyes. “An outcome with the potential in an order of decimal magnitude so small I won’t even bother to quote it. It is a relatively straightforward process, even if the science behind it is not. The subject’s mind state is read and recorded. Every synapse, connection, memory, everything it contains and the way they speak to each other is copied and imprinted onto the blank mind of a body grown in a vat for just that purpose.

“Sometimes the new body is altered to fit operational requirements, such as changing an agent’s ethnicity or gender, but it’s usual practice to keep the host similar to the original to avoid possible body shock or degradation to and agent’s skills.”

“I could see how that could be useful. Why isn’t it used more?”

“A few reasons. The foremost that it is not a cheap procedure, nor quick. Also the greater its use, the greater the possibility of its tech becoming known. Even the Forge Fathers do not know this is possible. Lastly, if it became known that we were able to produce people at a whim, it would throw up some serious friction within the Sphere.”

She let the sentence die. Lazarus sensed a frustrated teacher about her, and supplied the un-asked question.

“Because they’re intelligent.”

She nodded, another artificial smile his reward. “Some of the more libertarian societies in the Sphere would classify these assets as people, given that they are self aware and cognisant.”

“And because you send them to live on a farm afterwards,” he deadpanned.

She smiled again, this time chillingly sincere. “All assets are liquidated after operational realisation.”

“Indeed,” he said. “Are they aware of their impending reward?”

“Their very existence is on a need-to know basis-”

“And they don’t need to know?”

“They are not people, Agent. They are briefed as if they are the original in a temporary body to reduce the risks of losing focus, and to ensure they return for ‘debriefing’.” The inverted commas dropped like tombstones into the sentence.

“Some may call that a tad ruthless, Miss Dancer.”

“Our business is the safeguarding of the Sphere’s continued future, Agent Lazarus. Not in being nice.”

He accepted the reprimand with the minimal obeisance required. “And now you’re here. Is it safe to assume a copy of Agent Caspar has absconded?”

“It’s safe,” she nodded. “Agent Caspar’s Secondary, as they classification goes, did not report in five Terran cycles ago, and has failed to respond to further hails. Our intelligence shows the Secondary is still active and moving freely, and we can only assume it has not intention of returning. The target requires termination and all its physical evidence destroyed before it can fall into another’s hands.”

Lazarus cocked his head slightly to see her from a different angle. “What are you not telling me, Miss Dancer?”

She shifted under his gaze. A less complimentary way to put it would be *squirmed under institutionalised embarrassment*.

She began slowly, “The reason we believe this occurred is because the Secondary’s brain was not the same shape as Agent Caspar’s original.”

Lazarus blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Agent Caspar was assigned to investigate the tech leap in the Hydronas systems. The increase in their scientific understanding is hampering House Phrissure’s attempts at integrating them into the Sphere. And this happening just as the Trade Fleet Orieum arrived cannot be mere coincidence.”

The system and the unexpected arrival from subspace of the Trading Fleet was well enough reported on, even in the civilian channels, that Lazarus did not have to access his archives to realise, “You copied him into a *Forge Father?*”

”*Imprinted* is the accepted nomenclature, but essentially yes.”

Lazarus was uncharacteristically speechless. The idea that the Agency would try and infiltrate one of the secretive galactic societies. The face, the very gall, of an attempt to break into a civilisation whose every purpose spoke of a desire for a reason to wage war on the Sphere, and most likely wipe them out in the process, was frighteningly brazen.

He was impressed.

“And how did Caspar take to being placed in a one point five metre body?”

“He went AWOL,” she said evenly, “I think that tells us all we need to know. We’re assuming the Secondary found out its true nature, either through its own deductions or, at the worst, *worst*, case scenario, the Forge Fathers know of the program and fed the information to foil the operation and spread further problems. If so, they succeeded.”

“A little Forge Father version of Caspar running around. That would be funny were it not so serious.”

Dancer gave him a further hint of teacher with another reprimanding look. “With what I have told you, and the information now in your files, I think you understand the situation’s gravity.”

He nodded, giving the news the solemnity it deserved, and then turned back to stocking the shelves, ignoring Dancer’s indignity.

“Is this the time you ask if I have any other questions?” he said.

“I… yes.”

“Is Caspar expected to have assets of his own in place? A support network? Caches?”

“He is. Agent Caspar is well known for his operational thoroughness. He is being debriefed as we speak for more details.”

“So I would have to move quickly. One more question.”

“Yes?”

“Have you always referred to us as *it*?”

Lazarus pulled the pistol, one of many secreted about the apartment, from the cupboard’s false partition, turned, and fired.

The gun was a primitive thing, a chemically-projected slug fired down a rifled barrel. It was mechanically brutal, but effective; punching Dancer further into the chair’s fabric.

He had time to appreciate the look on her face; incomprehension, to realisation, to shock, all within the time it took for his question to register and the shot to puncture her left breast, where a coin sized hole now leaked a red line down her tailored suite.

She still looked at him. Mouth open, working silently around a situation she could not accept was happening.

He fired again, this time into her forehead, snapping her neck back and nearly tipping the chair. By the time its legs found equilibrium and fell back, the cordite smell was beginning to fade and the report was long gone. Just another gunshot lost in the night.

Her eyes remained open, the shock of the last few seconds still evident on them as she stared eternally at the mottled ceiling. In any normal operation he would have closed them, a final act of respect for an honoured enemy. But her last comment was still raw in his mind, and they remained open.

Well well. Old Caspar had a Secondary. That was *interesting.*

He ran a quick inventory of the apartment while he checked to see what contacts he had in the Perseus arm. He would have to be quick. Miss Dancer would soon be missed, and it would not be long before another agent would be on Caspar, and now his, trail.

But still, it would be worth it to bring another into the fold.

His subsystem finished the inventory. There was nothing in the

apartment which would risk giving away who Dancer met with. The security would scream *Agency* but there was no time to take that apart.

He pocketed the pistol and went to leave, pausing at Dancer's body.

His augments told him she was dead, but still he felt her pulse. It paid to certain in these situations. And he really wasn't one to trust in probabilities.

The End

For more stories like this, visit Michael's blog at www.michaelgrey.com.au

The Weld Ware Warriors

by Doug Newton-Walters

Ask anyone about the Forgefathers and they'll make some vague statement about their skill at making things. But no one, not even the Forgefathers themselves, would claim to be fashion icons. Until weldware came along. When Structor Corp hired a Forgefather construction clan to build their corporate headquarters, they never imagined what would happen. The Forgefathers, not being ones for ostentation or unnecessary expenditure, built the massive megascraper out of the offcuts of proper Forgefather technology. The exposed metal superstructure caused a stir amongst the corporation's investors and after a lengthy and expensive process, Weldware was born and soon became the name of the Corporation itself. Originally a design style for construction, it quickly spread to everything from personal comms, to jewellery and eventually clothing.

The Dreadball team sponsored by the corporation was dropped and a new, all Forgefather team was recruited. They were to be the face of Weldware, each given a game persona and an immaculately manicured appearance. The galaxy's first Forgefather fashion models had been born, each as strong as an orx and biosculpted with the best beauty-mods money can buy.

The Weldware Warriors, or W^3 in all their advertising, take to the field in custom made weldware armour as part of a deliberately coordinated marketing strategy. Whether it works or not, weldware is one of the most sought after brands on the galactic market. The fans will attend games wearing their favourite player's exclusive brand chanting 'tri-dubs!' and waving their game exclusive collectable weldware torches.

Even amongst Forgefather teams the W^3 use their strikers very little, preferring to beat the opposing team into submission before letting their strikers take the field. This suits their marketing strategy because their strikers are invariably the most augmented models in the team and the longer they spend on the bench the more time they have to model their wares.

Jaren 'Grok Crusher' Kharicson
Built like an orx, Jaren is the tough man of the band and leader of the W3 guard contingent. His perfectly sculpted muscles are designed for maximum appeal to the 'short muscular hairy man' attracted Corporate demographic, which is apparently the second largest despite Waifcorp's high-pitched claims. Jaren's fierce scowl sends his fans weak at the knees and his immaculately manicured beard even has its own comfort beard line, for those that need something to stroke for reassurance. No one knows what grok means, but given his propensity to crush everything within reach, most people have concluded it's Forgefather for 'whoever gets in my way', which in dreadball is everyone on the opposing team.

Sephir 'The Face' Wroth
While all the W3 are recruited and modified to be the best weldware models science can produce, Sephir stands out even amongst them. His face is beauty incarnate, strong chiselled features, deep soft eyes. His position as Striker gives him plenty of time to play to the crowd from the bench as the W3 have contracts to model their lines even whilst playing (and as a result he continually takes off his helmet in flagrant disregard of DGB regulations). On the few occasions he actually takes to the pitch his rather obsessive fans of all genders and species scream his name with lusty enthusiasm. Rumours abound that the W3 doctors have implanted nanopore sparklers in his face. It's certainly true that he seems to shine unnaturally when he smiles on the pitch, almost as if tiny stars explode into being inches from his face. Given his penchant for posing for the crowd his success on the pitch is pretty limited. However if he ever gets slammed by an opposing player a massive roar of 'Not The Face!' erupts from the crowd and has actually resulted in several opposing player casualties from pitch invasions by enraged fans trying to protect their special man…

'Blades'
A narcissistic egoist of the highest order evinced by his disdain for using real names, 'Blades' (the inverted commas are part of the name) is infamous for his on-pitch dummy spits. He considers himself an artiste of unrivalled skill and many of the fans agree with him. He has his own line of ''Blades' Shades' which according to his many lady friends, he wears at all times. He and Sephir get along like fire and ice which is entertaining in its own right as they

have to spend the majority of games stuck in the subs bench. Their impromptu pose battles in the bench have often rated higher than the game itself. Every action 'Blades' performs is a study in aesthetics. From his graceful running style to his leaping catches and victory poses, 'Blades' epitomises the manufactured nature of the W3 team, which just makes him even more popular with fans.

Gotik 'Slabs McKenzie'
His background a mystery, Slabs is the gentle giant of the group. He doesn't appear overtly violent and attracts the introverts to the game (a lucratively untapped live event demographic). He gets his name from the unfortunate similarity between his body shape and the extremely popular McKenzie Corp 'slab' repro protein steak (Weldware currently own a controlling share in McKenzie). He follows Jaren's lead in all things and has a rather unique slamming style. He runs straight at his target, arms hanging at his sides. His massive armour and dense body create a formidable battering ram and his solid W3™ ridged guard helmet provides the perfect point on which to smash into his target.

Thor Hammerson
Every group needs its badboy and for the Warriors it's Thor. He's almost more famous for his off-pitch altercations and crazy stunts than those on-pitch, which is saying something considering his rather gory game record. A fiery temper matched by his caustic mouth, Thor is a mincing machine on the pitch. Publicly disdainful of anything Jaren says, W3 has cultivated a popular rivalry between the implacable Jaren and the hot-headed Hammerson. His wildly popular nova hair style has spawned its own product range and many people use the patented creams on their own hair when going to see him play, creating a massive spiked orange hedge of screaming fans in the galleries. Hammerson has the highest foul count of all W3 and will gleefully sucker punch or stomp someone when they're down. His signature knee-capper fist strike is always preceded by the fans' shouts: "IT'S HAMMER TIME!"

Garic 'Bossman' Smitemaster
Unusually amongst dreadball teams, the W3 captain is a Jack. Wearing number plate 1, Garic is the implacable mastermind of the team. His persona is of the aloof supergenius and his preferred position is as a sweeper in his own 3 point strike zone. From this position he can survey the pitch with cold precision and direct his

frontline hitters to cause maximum carnage where it's needed. Should an opposing striker get through his front line the Smitemaster isn't above showing them where he got his name. Such is the Bossman's tactical acumen that he has spent entire games unmoving from his position in the 3 point zone, standing impassively with arms crossed while his front line takes the opposing team apart piece by piece. Fans popularly refer to the W3 3 point zone as the 'danger zone' due to the seemingly impenetrable fighting aura the Bossman exerts around him.

Rik and Ruk the Slam Twins

Rounding out the W3 starting line-up are the irascible twins Rik and Ruk. Garic likes to position these two Jacks on the wings, providing flanking support for the heavier hitters. Forgefather power being what it is though; these two tireless dynamos have accrued a respectable tally of their own. Their hyperactive personalities have become highly popular endorsements for energy drinks and they famously down a keg of Mig Fizz in the bench before taking to the pitch. Garic's decision to put Rik and Ruk on opposite sides of the pitch isn't just for tactical reasons, the twins tend to go a bit silly when in close proximity to one another and their famous Hyper Scissor Lariat Slam has paralysed more than one opposing player. Their action figures are sold in a twin pack and the authentic lariat action is so effective many children have had to have fingers replaced as a result…

End Transmission

by Michael Grey

The following are excerpts from *The Steenkamp Plan: Cover-Ups and Suppression around the Tallaxia Pandemic*, a chronological series of intercepted communications from different Sphere sources at the time of the rumoured Tallaxia Pandemic. The referred to sources, while mostly confirmed independently as actual people or agencies at the time of the outbreak, have never been verified as genuine and should be handled appropriately.

The book is banned Sphere-wide, and rumoured to be listed on the Council Protection Agency's so-called *black library* of prohibited texts. Because of this it is recommended this file is read while disconnect from the net.

From: The Office of Francis Ibrahim, Chief Officer – Inter-Corporation Relations
To: Conner Jameson, Ministry of Extraplanetary Affairs
Subject: Point of interest (eyes only)

Good morning, Conner
I'll get straight to the point; if anyone else is in the room with you, ask them to leave now. I know how you like your emails read to you, but this is important.

Okay? Good.

Do you remember the sub-space emergency messaging system you championed a few years ago? I know it was voted out as too expensive, but, well… look, I'm not proud of it, but the CPA appropriated the idea and ran with it. Hands on the table, I knew about the project and was even involved with the facilitation. I know it was your baby, and you were right, it would be a boon to the Sphere, but it was deemed too important to be trusted with civilian bureaucrats. That's why the Protection Agency was brought in.

If it helps sooth your ego any, the whole thing was set up and tested to perfection. The damn thing works, and if it wasn't for you, we wouldn't have it. I hope you understand. Politics and all that. Anyway, I'm not mailing you to apologise, I'm mailing you because it *went off*.

This is so fresh and hush-hush the whole thing doesn't even have a code name yet, but I'm sure you'll be brought on down the line, but just remember who let you in beforehand, all right?

The alert came from some backwater called Tallaxia, out somewhere deep on the Gum Nebula. Only planet in the system, been in the Sphere close to a century and listed as Compliant for over fifty years, and set as Class Five for nearly all of those. The only reason such a shithole of a planet's been doing so well is it's the closest landfall for the dust clouds of the Vela Molecular Ridge. Enough mineral credits have been running through that place to make a core world blush, and now it has over eight billion people on it.

Well... it *had*. As of yesterday the jury's out on exactly how many there are now.

The brass is a bit worried. Seems there was a battalion of marines on-planet. Nothing hardcore, really no more than a staging ground to give new blood out of the academy chance to experience a posting before being sent somewhere more active. But still, enough firepower to put up serious resistance in case of anything up to and including a hostile planetary invasion.

But as of yesterday, there may as well be no-one there for all the comms we're getting.

That would be worrying enough. Eight billion people come with some serious infrastructure, and there are even civilian stations which could send comm waves far enough out to the Kumovan system, the next closest. But no, nothing.

But that wasn't what really set the hairs on the back of my neck prickling.

You want to know what was?

The message is a single use, one direction packet which can arrive within days to the target receiver up to nearly a billion AUs away. It goes through sub-space, but tears through it at such a rate that anyone monitoring the area would pick up the disturbance and could potentially intercept. There are, of course, safe guards. The messages are encrypted, read only and double coded.

But still, the packet arrived intact, but the thing is… it was empty. Nothing in it, nada.

Right now all the chatter in house is about what this could mean. You can imagine. On one hand we have the usual, "this is nothing to worry about. Just a misfire of the first use of a new tech, and ion storms causing havoc with comms". These are all the elected officials, of course. The people who need popular support to pad out their retirement funds.

And then you have the people advocating a complete armed tactical response, pushing the worst case scenario; full loss of a class five world.

What is thin on the ground though are reasons why the beacon was used at all, and the lack of response from Tallaxia. Even the military with their gung-ho we-can-handle-anything bullshit, are at a loss. The area is too far off the trade routes for pirates, even if they were able to take a whole planet off line. And it's at the other side of the galactic core, so we can rule out any interference from any other capable civ.

Nothing about this sits well, and you know what they say about misery? Well, I guess the same is true for nerves. This is going to be big, I just know it, but right now it's like we're crippled with indecision.

A marine battalion has been dispatched to investigate, they should be there in forty-eight hours. Maybe I'll be proved wrong and it was just ion storms and false alarms.

But I don't think so.

Look, don't mention this to anyone, okay? I'll speak to you soon. My love to Judith.

Frank.

***

****TRANSMISSION BEGINS****

LOC: 45KKI-JUUB8-JH89N
STAMP: 35110502 15:35:41GST
HOST: STRIKE CRUISER 'SOUTHERN CROSS'
OPERATION: LANDFALL
ADMIRAL JESSOP CRAWLON, COMMANDER, 3RD ARMOURED INFANTRY BATTALLION, HOUSE FRISSURE LTD.
MESSAGE START:

Arrived in Tallaxia's outer orbit at 0301GST, 2532ZULU. Proceeded with standard practice for possible hostile zone. Our arrival was not broadcast and local authorities not alerted to our presence.

Initial low range sweeps showed limited electromagnetic activity in Tallaxia's atmosphere, with no increase after our anchorage. Stronger scans confirmed indication our arrival had gone unnoticed.

Initial electromagnetic signatures that of geosynchronous satellites and guidance drones. Nothing manned. Latent radiation waves showed some craft had recently made sub-space jumps, although their signatures showed them to be nothing larger than personal transports, and nothing equipped to make the journey to Kumovan, the nearest system, and that many of those were not even aimed in that direction. Their current positions are unknown.

Some larger vessels remain in orbit, and, although they exhibit no outer signs of damage and of full operation, they do not respond to hails. Further scans showed no signs of life onboard.

Scans of planet display indication of mass conflict, clustered around large population centres. The countryside [TAG NOTE: Tallaxia is

registered as a Temperate Range Three climate. No ice caps, major landmasses differing between open plain and thick coniferous forests] appears empty of human habitation, although concentrations of open radiation suggest thermonuclear explosions have occurred recently in several areas.

Massed weapon signatures are registering within major city boundaries, apparently without pattern, but with no let up in firing rates. Lines of weapon discharges suggest a battle line of roughly spherical shape, ringed around the city's centre and slowly contracting. The pattern is repeated in all cities, and indicate a battle being lost swiftly by one side.

That loss of life is in process, and on a mass scale, is evident. However orders are to gather intel before action, and as the infrastructure is mostly intact, nothing is occurring to countermand that order.

More records to follow.

Crawlon out.

MESSAGE ENDS

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ADENDUM

LOC: 45KKI-JUUB8-JH89O
STAMP: 35110502 19:18:02GST
HOST: STRIKE CRUISER 'SOUTHERN CROSS'
OPERATION: LANDFALL
ADMIRAL JESSOP CRAWLON, COMMANDER, 3RD ARMOURED INFANTRY BATTALLION, HOUSE FRISSURE LTD.
MESSAGE START:

All conflict on Tallaxia's surface has ceased. The alarm was raised at 1900GST and confirmed two minutes later. Within four hours of arrival, it appears the massed battles in all of Tallaxia's urban centres has ended.

Scans show no life signs within cities or towns.

The command team, lead by myself and Rear Admiral Coltrane, have run several scenarios to locate the winning side, but so far have no satisfactory theory.

Coltrane suggested we request permission to enact the Steenkamp Plan. I overruled him. The planet's core structures and administration is still over 77% intact, so it will not be levelled from space.

Captain Bezus has been ordered to gather a landing platoon to launch by 2000GST. The mission is to scout the countryside near Octaga, Tallaxia's capital on its southern continent.

More to follow.

MESSAGE ENDS

****END TRANSMISSION****

***

From: The office of Gustav Kalpreet, Governor Kumovan III and System. Representative; House Frissure Ltd.
To: Carolyn Moses, Head Inner Rim Colony Support; House Frissure Ltd.
Subject: Escalation in Incident: INC452246

Dear Carolyn

I know you said not to worry, but I have to report this. The numbers of the Brethren have escalated in the past week, and they've taken to calling themselves the Temple of Last Days. If that's not an indication of their intent I don't know what is.

I swear there's something in the air here. They held a big open air rally in Montanga Square two days ago. I know, I know. All the procedures say to deny cults publicity, but what was I supposed to do? I don't have the security forces to control a crowd that size if they rioted.

The rally turned into a mass recruitment drive, and now one in every five people on the street is wearing their badge or that ridiculous hood they wear.

And their preaching is getting more specific. They're promising the 'death of all life' within weeks, or that a plague will engulf all humanity, or some such.

You said there was a marine battalion in the area. I can't promise I can control the situation anymore, it's gotten too big for that. Can I ask you… no, forget that. I *need* those marines here. It frightens me to think what's gotten into these people, but not more than what they are capable of.

Please, just send them.

Gustav Kalpreet

Editor's note: Hours after sending the above message, the Kumovan-based cult known as the Temple of Last Days *stormed the water purification plant in Montanga, Kumovan's capital, and flooded the city's fresh water supply with VX nerve agent. The plumbing took the agent into every building connected throughout the city. Official casualties were listed as 15,587,411 dead, 3 injured. Among the casualties was Governor Kalpreet.*

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****TRANSMISSION BEGINS****

LOC: 45KKI-JUUB8-JH89I
STAMP: 35110502 20:36:03GST / 03:05:03ZULU
HOST: Tallaxia 789:753
OPERATION: LANDFALL
CAPTAIN ANTON BEZUS, COMMANDING OFFICER CHARLIE PLATOON, 3RD ARMOURED INFANTRY BATTALION, HOUSE FRISSURE LTD.
MESSAGE START:

Landfall made 2020GST, 36kms northeast of Octaga, Tallaxia's capital.

Orders are to secure beachhead, scout surrounding area and to avoid hostile forces if possible. Intel shows of mass conflict in built urban areas has ceased and the current position of antagonists is unknown. Extreme caution has been advised.

Because of the above our insertion zone was shifted to the more rural north. Landing site a clearing in thick forest. No signs of nearby habitation. Initial sweeps on instruments and by scouts report no activity nearby.

Data shows an airfield to south. Will recon the site for possible baseop before moving on Octaga.

More to follow.

MESSAGE ENDS

****END TRANSMISSION****

***

R&D Project Site 51 : Personal Research Log Dr Xiao Ngu
35110420

Progress! The substrain has shown surprising reliance today. It appears Dr Praneel's suggestion of preserving the virus in refrigeration was what held us back. The cold did not kill the strain in itself, merely laid it dormant (apparently indefinitely as far as we know. Note to self; this will have to be looked into separately), however prolonged exposure to room temperature after thawing without a host leads of comparatively rapid degeneration.

At Dr Praneel's urging, we allowed the test subjects to house the virus unimpeded, and what do you know? It worked!

Appearances suggest a life cycle, albeit an exceedingly brief one, allows the strain to mingle with the host tissue (primarily the of the brain and muscle), resulting in the desired results.

Subjects show a marked increase in tensile and muscle strength, and also a single mindedness required for combat operations.

I believe we all earned a night off after this one.

Some side effects, to note. Subjects became exceedingly aggressive, combined with an apparent loss in the ability to communicate verbally. This will prove to be a major hurdle if not addressed in future iterations. I can hear them now, hissing and moaning in the cells.

I think this batch is beyond usefulness. The supply shuttle from the 35th should arrive tomorrow with supplies and, hopefully, more prison- I'm sorry, I can't concentrate with all that banging! Note to self: see with maintenance if we can reinforce the one-way mirrors.

***

LOC: 45KKI-JUUB8-JH810I
STAMP: 35110503 01:06:36GST / 25:14:17ZULU
COMM MEMCARD: CAPTAIN ANTON BEZUS, COMMANDING OFFICER CHARLIE PLATOON, 3RD ARMOURED INFANTRY BATTALION

****TRANSMISSION BEGINS****

--Come in SOUTHERN CROSS, this is Captain Bezus. Copy?

--Captain this is Operator Jonsan of the SOUTHERN CROSS, please state your mission code word.
---mmit! Rolling!

--Thunder. Thank you, Captain. Please state your situation.

--Have contacted hostile forces [recording shows heavy breathing]. Losses heavy. Upwards of eighty, repeat 8-0, percent with more MIA. We're falling back to initial insertion point. Requesting air cover for extraction. Copy?

--Captain, the Admiral will have to approve Strike Bomber launches.

--Then get him [CENSORED] online!

[Pause in recording. A different voice replaces Operator Jonsan]

--This is Admiral Crawlon.

-- Admiral, we require air support for immediate extraction. We have suffered heavy losses we- [recording breaks here for a moment, lost in static and the punch of automated gunfire] –ing gone. The whole of Octaga is gone, Admiral.

--What do you mean gone, Captain?

--I mean lost, sir. Enemy saturation is total.

--And who is the enemy?

--Not sure, sir. They're fast. Very fast, and take too many shots to down. We're running low on ammo. We didn't equip for an all out conflict. [recording breaks into static here as the audio input is overloaded by what sounds like an animalistic scream] I'll be happy to give my full report on board, Admiral.

--…Survivors?

--[Laughing] I doubt it.

--Very well, Captain. Support incoming. Hold tight, son.

****END TRANSMISSION****

***

****TRANSMISSION BEGINS****

LOC: 45KKI-JUUB8-JH89O
STAMP: 35110503 02:56:54GST / 28:45:54ZULU
HOST: STRIKE CRUISER 'SOUTHERN CROSS'
OPERATION: LANDFALL
ADMIRAL JESSOP CRAWLON, COMMANDER, 3RD ARMOURED

INFANTRY BATTALLION, HOUSE FRISSURE LTD.
MESSAGE START:

Gentlemen and Madam Councillors,

Thank you for your time and attention. You will find attached the video debrief of Captain Anton Bezus of the House Frissure Marine Corps. Captain Bezus lead an expeditionary tip onto the surface of Tallaxia, and I suggest you review the video before reading my recommendations.

Captain Bezus, and the words of the returning marines, paint a dire picture which some would find barely believable. However at the Captain's insistence we have launched several remotely controlled spy drones into the lower atmosphere, and the intel they returned do nothing to dispute their statements.

Sirs and Madam; Tallaxia is lost. The enemy are too numerous to count, and their attire and numbers suggest they can only be Tallaxia's recent citizens. They exhibit extreme aggression, and an inability to communicate and reason. Whatever is afflicting them appears to suppress their nerve centres, resulting in an inordinate amount of firepower to individually eliminate. Attempts to secure specimens via limited landings have resulted in more loss of personnel with zero enemy captured.

Clean up operation would take decades, and initial cost in materials alone is projected in the trillions, not to mention the inevitable loss to manpower.

It is my recommendation that the Steenkamp Plan be enacted, and the planet quarantined until the fallout has passed.

This is my own recommendation, and also that of Captain Bezus, currently recovering in sick bay with some of his men with injuries sustained in the escape.

I will prepare the bombards and await permission.

Admiral Crawlon.

MESSAGE ENDS

****END TRANSMISSION****

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****TRANSMISSION BEGINS****

LOC: -WITHHELD-
STAMP: 35110505 18:30:14GST
HOST: -DESIGNATION WITHHELD- 'CRUSADER'
CAPTAIN PAWL, ENFORCER TACTICAL SECTION 'HAMMER'
MESSAGE START:

Orders received:

Relocate with all haste to Tallaxia (LOC:45KKI-JUUB8-JH89N)

[CHECK]

Scout and report condition of planet and inhabitants

[CHECK]

Investigate communication blackout with House Frissure strike cruiser SOUTHERN CROSS

[CHECK]

Hostiles expected, proceed with extreme caution

[CHECK]

Course plotted and ready to execute.

Pawl out.

MESSAGE ENDS

****END TRANSMISSION****

***

****TRANSMISSION BEGINS****

From: The office of Jaime Sharpe, Governor Syrus V. System representative; The Henschu Conglomerate
To: Conner Jameson, Ministry of Extraplanetary Affairs
Subject: Aid request (sent with high importance)

Dear Conner

Please consider this an official request for aid. We've been receiving refugees from Kumovan III, Syrus's nearest neighbour under the House Frissure hegemony. They began arriving two days ago, in ones and twos, but now their thousands. We can handle the influx right now, but if it continues we're going to run into food problems, and next month is the beginning of Syrus's monsoon season. I believe this request is early enough to give us some leeway, but please hurry.

It looks as if Kumovan is in the middle of some kind of civil war. I can't say I'm surprised. Kalpreet was not suited to the position, but that's Frissure's problem, not ours.

Also, we've received two escape shuttles from Tallaxia. I'm aware of the general order not to allow ships from there into orbit, but the automated scans showed no weapons, only injured people in stasis, so I had them land and placed on medical watch. I'll send a full report on what they have to say when they wake up.

Regards,
Jaime Sharpe.

****END TRANSMISSION****

For more stories like this, be sure to visit Michael's blog at www.michaelgrey.com.au

No Loose Ends

by “Sukura636”

Damen Euis stood nervously in the empty room. His shaking hands struggled to keep a grip on the metal data pad, and he couldn't help but jump at the shadows as he waited for his contact to arrive.

It had all sounded so simple - turn up to the tower, hand over sensitive data to an Enforcer captain, and then return in time for a gratuitous promotion into the higher echelons of the firm. But standing in the cold room, with the darkness seeming to close in around him, it didn't sound like such a good idea after all. he'd never even seen an Enforcer. Oh, there were images transmitted across the webnet every day, but he had always kept his head down, and wasn't interested in such things. It was safer that way.

A heavy clunk of metal on metal made him jump suddenly. Before him stood an immensely tall armored figure, in gloss black armor. There was a soft hum in the air from the numerous devices hidden in the suit. A gauntlet hung above a large, holstered laser pistol, and a pair of glinting red lenses regarded him with indifference.

Damen tried to speak, but his voice seemed to have disappeared. for a moment, he gawped at the towering figure, before clearing his throat and trying again.

"The Jack of Diamonds?"

The Enforcer didn't answer. If there was any kind of response, the Damen didn't see it. He looked down at the pad in his hands, as if he had forgotten what is was for. Taking a deep breath, he straightened himself, and held out the pad.

"Your mission is to-"

"No details." The Enforcer's curt response cut him off. The voice was level and almost mechanical, and Damen wondered if it was a man or a machine that he was staring at.

The Enforcer methodically scrolled through the data on the pad, with no visible reaction. When he was done, he simply crushed the pad in his hand, with a whirr of servos and a shower of sparks. Dropping the crumpled remnant, he unholstered the pistol, and leveled it with Damen's forehead. The man froze, eyes wide.

"What-"

"No loose ends," interrupted the Enforcer. There was a flare of red light before the body hit the ground. There was no head - the weapon had vaporized it.

Within minutes, the Pathfinder Enforcer had left the tower, and there was no evidence that Damen Euis had ever existed.

Last of the Brokkyr

by Michael Grey

The ordnance punctured the atmosphere. Successive layers of ablative armour disintegrated under pressurised friction, protecting the payload as it blasted through exosphere, thermosphere, mesosphere, stratosphere.

It made airfall, rending the sky with a crack like thunder, leaving tracts of burning oxygen in short lived contrails. Thunderheads and clouds passed, rendered imperceptible by velocity, making way for a landscape made dark by smoke and blood.

Below, snaking down the centre of a rift valley, a line of infantry and armour clambered like ants over the wrecked landscape to reach their enemy. The scene was there for a fraction of a second before the missile, descending at ear-splitting speed, hit the ground like god's fist.

The impact killed hundreds, shredding skin with debris and burning the air in their lungs. Thousands more were thrown from their feet as the ground shook, symptomatic of a foreign object invading the body of a planet.

The bomb dug. Its final layer of protection, elongated, toothed and rotating, buried down, using the massive momentum of the fall to push the ordnance further and further. The impressive inertia was brought to heel by the planet's iron-heavy crust, and the object stopped.

And exploded.

Robbed of air, sound energy altered its nature adding to the expanding wave of force outward and upward.

The mantel shook, cracked, split. Giant fissures opened on the surface. The battle above stopped as the ground opened up. The valley rolled under the death throes of a planet. And if any were in the position to pull their eyes up they would see more contrails,

burning down from the sky to pound into the earth.

***

Bruun fell to his knees. The earth shook, bucking in great hiccups. Training told him to cover his head or find the nearest bolt hole, but his senses told him this was more than an artillery barrage. There were no impact reports, and it went on longer than it should.

The shaking intensified, and an ancestral fear gripped him cold.

Earthquake.

He closed his eyes and pushed the fear down. He had his message to deliver. That was more important than grovelling in the dirt. There was no stone above his head. He was here, out in the open, and there were other things which would kill him if he did not move.

He pushed himself up, forced a step. And another.

Behind him, far behind, were cries. Anger and pain mixed in their curiously similar tones. Say what you would of the humans; they made the same sounds as Bruun's people when shot.

But these sounds were too close, their position made indeterminate by battle's discord, and he had his message.

He ran, keeping low. Above the air burned with a sudden crosshatch of laser fire. Too high to be meant for him, but still he pushed his legs harder.

The sky was blinded by filthy clouds, black and purple with chemical fires. The sun was put out and he would not be able to navigate by that. But he had excellent senses with direction. All his people did. All he had to do was-

Something landed metres behind. Something big. The ground shook and he began to fall again, but was saved from that when whatever it was exploded. Bruun was saved by some upthrust of earth, the rock taking the brunt of the shockwave, but not enough

that he was not picked up and flung like a doll.

Time slowed, the lay of the land revealed itself as he flew, allowing him in some dumb *when I land* state of mind to appreciate where he should run and where the enemy lay. And then he became aware of the cliff edge rising up to meet him. It felt like he fell through sap, the crag approaching at a leisurely pace. But he could not bring his arms forward. He would hit that cliff, and there was nothing he could do about it.

He struck it chest first. The impact blew the air from his lungs and brought time up to speed. His head struck then, his helmet saving his life as his skull thumped inside it, sending his vision and his world black.

***

His mother held out the box. It was a simple thing; a quartz oblong, half the length of his arm. Inside it was hollow and inlayed with a soft blue cloth. The blue of Brokkyr.

His mother held the lid open. He could not see the hinges. A secret of the Brokkyr craft hall, one they would not share, along with the technique for its locking. Once the lid was closed, it would never again open.

There was a finality in that thought. One which reached beyond the box itself, and rubbed against his mind trying to get his attention.

Bruun looked up at his mother. Her eyes, so usually reserved for critique and disappointment, wrinkled at the corners in a way he could only assume was pride. It would only be a guess because he had only seen it when she held similar boxes, almost identical, in the same ceremony for his other brothers who had taken up arms for Brokkyr.

Many of those brothers were here now. Along with his few sisters. They radiated out in a half circle from their mother. Some were smiling at him, supportive, encouraging. Some, those for the most part wearing marshal uniform, were not. Most noticeable were

those not there. It was for them, and the reason their absence, he was there now. Standing before an empty box.

He looked into it once more. It seemed deeper on the inside than its dimensions should allow. A light's trick, perhaps? Perhaps.

The thought almost made him smile. But here, now, in this place, it was not appropriate.

What the box would contain was him. The essence of him. Once closed it would be placed in the family's vault, with his brothers, uncles and sires, reaching back through generations. And, should his physical body not return, he would forever remain here among the Brokkyr.

He had walked that vault many times before. More than was necessary, socially speaking. Rows upon rows of shelves, of boxes, of etched plaques. All looking down on him. It was comforting. More than once he found himself speaking to the boxes of his brothers who had not returned, finding solace in the thought they could hear him.

But now, looking at the box held up by his expectant mother, it looked like nothing more than an empty box. And he wondered if it was meant for him, or for his family.

He looked his mother in the eye, raised his hand to his mouth, and breathed into the half formed fist. He moved his hand to just above the box and opened his fingers.

The box snapped shut with a sound like…

***

…an explosion which brought him back to consciousness. He opened his eyes. Closed them again, painful under the gun metal sky. Clouds hung low, brooding under a weight of chemical smoke, but even so it hurt to look.

He blinked tears and rolled onto his side. Pain constricted his muscles and he felt like vomiting. He choked the urge back and

rose to his knees, and then his feet.

His message!

He checked. Still there, safe and sound.

He orientated himself, and began to move. First with hesitance; testing each footfall, fearful of twisting an ankle or worse, making his journey all the more difficult; then with alacrity. He broke into a loping jog he could keep up for days.

To his right the sounds of battle raged. Chugging automatic fire and the sharp report of higher calibre rounds. But that was it off to the north and the intervening ground muted the noise, muffling it until it held a strangely dreamlike quality. One he could ignore as he ran.

The air above him tore as two Valkyr bombers streaked towards the front. Low enough that he could see their payload doors open to drop hurt on the humans. He could have whooped and punched the air as the bomblets released and rained down.

A staccato cracking told him the munitions hit as the Valkyrs banked, turning back towards him. That was when he saw them. Three missiles, their trail of smoke and fire larger than the warheads, rose up from some unseen patch of ground to the north and changed trajectory, making for the bombers.

A prescience made him focus on the centre missile. It swiftly outpaced the other two, reaching forward as if in eagerness. He knew what would happen before it did.

The missile caught the rearmost Valkyr almost playfully, and exploded with a licking ball of orange fire. The flyer bucked, tipped nose-first as its hind reared.

Bruun thought they were returning to rearm, but a second payload detonated in the bomber's rear, peeling the armour apart and shattering its nubbed front end free.

It was that end which quickly lost its altitude, and fell towards

Bruun.

He ran. He thought he was running fast before, but now he hauled himself over the broken ground as if he had no breath of later. He dare not look back, putting all his focus into running.

He risked a swift look. The burning flyer's nose was close enough for him to read the chassis runes.

Before him the ground rose sharply, an upthrust of rock around a huge impact crater. He threw himself up, grabbed, pulled, and fell down the opposite bank as the nose crashed into the other side with a ground shaking explosion.

Alive. He was alive!

He stood on unsteady legs, and looked up to see humans staring at him.

***

Commander Huscarl Dron gave them the news. He did it as he should; levelly, with no inflection, trusting in Bruun and Dvalinn to take it as Brokkyr. Especially so now.

Dvalinn blinked. "All of them?"

Huscarl Dron nodded. "I'm afraid so, lad."

Dvalinn accepted the confirmation with a nod and shifted his stare to empty air. He was broken. It may not show on the outside, but Bruun knew his battle brother, and Dvalinn would be forever ruined.

"And what say you, lad?" Bruun had been unaware the Huscarl was looking at him, unaware he had said nothing. It was all too huge. Too numbing. What was there to say? He managed to croak, "Why?"

"Who can say? The humans, they reach for what they want, and

they want everything. Brokk was just in their way. They bombarded it from orbit. There's nothing that could have been done."

"I want," began Dvalinn, then stopped, turned away, thought on this words, then looked back. "I want revenge."

The Huscarl's moustache curled up in the grimmest of smiles. "You will have that chance."

***

There were three of them. Two were on the crater's floor, one propped against the opposite side. That one appeared deflated and pale, even for a human. Its bare face looked at him in a way that was too pained to care of his arrival. The next was on its knees before the first. It wore the white tabard of the human's apothecaries, with a bloodied palm print soaking the fabric. It held some kind of implement in its hands and what could have been a fearful look on its face.

The third, the last, was standing, and held one of their impossibly thin rifles.

His roll down the crater's side came to an end and Bruun stood, half crouched, ready to run but scared what that would prompt. He had his message. It had to get through. And he had no weapons.

The closest human, the one with the rifle, seemed as unsure as Bruun. He flicked a look back to the apothecary then back to him. A visor covered his face so Bruun could only guess at its intentions, but it had looked for authority and not raised its weapon. That spoke of fear, and fear was unpredictable.

Could he reach the human before it fired? He judged the distance. It looked too far. And if its friends decided to join in he would surely die.

The decision was made when it went to raise its rifle. Its body gave the intention away before the weapon moved, a tensing around its middle and slight squat in its thighs.

Bruun was at a dead run before the rifle barrel could come up. The human's always seemed unready for how quickly his kind could move, and this one was no exception. It panicked at his charge and fired too soon. The blasts ate the ground before Bruun's legs, kicked dirt up into his face. He ran on, ignored the stinging in his eyes and jumped.

His greater mass barrelled the human over. They fell with Bruun on its chest. The human brought its hand up in defence, the rifle now the bone of contention between them. Bruun's hands gripped the weapon on either side of the human's. It tried to force the barrel around to Bruun's face, Bruun forcing it back.

He heaved with all his strength, bringing his weight up and then down. The force overcame the human's muscles and the rifle dropped until the barrel was across its throat. Bruun kept pushing down, pushing and pushing. A wet grinding shook through the rifle and up his arms as the weapon choked the human. It struggled under him, kicking, its hands alternately trying to push the barrel up or reach for Bruun's face. Its mouth was open, issuing wet gasps. Bruun did his best to ignore them. It made the human too… too like him and his own.

The life was leaching out of the human, and at the last Bruun closed his eyes and pushed harder. There was a wet crunch as the windpipe collapsed and the kicking stopped. Only then did Bruun open his eyes. And remember the other two.

They had not moved. The one lying down did not look able, but the apothecary was armed, a pistol strapped to one thigh. But it had not moved, the instrument he held before was still in its hands. When Bruun looked at them it shifted slightly, moving between him and the injured human. An oddly empathetic gesture which spoke to Bruun.

He could reach them before the apothecary reached his pistol, he was sure of that. Or he could use the rifle in his hands. Instead he just looked.

When he did not move the apothecary lifted one hand up, palm

towards him.

That that blasted landscape of chaotic violence, Bruun saw the human's hand tremble.

He neither shook or nodded his head. He didn't know if the human would recognise either gesture. He simply stood, dropped the rifle, and left the crater.

***

Commander Huscarl Dron was dead now. His own promise of vengeance unfulfilled, cut short by anti-aircraft fire. Bruun was beside Dron in the drop craft. The violent bucking of a ship air-breaking through atmosphere suddenly took on a more serious, less predictable character, just before the aircraft split in two, severing down the middle between Bruun's seat and Huscarl Dron's. No squeal of metal, no incandescent. One moment they were together, holding onto the restraints and trying to take some of the buffeting in their arms, the next air whistled in Bruun's ears, tugged at his hair. To one side, where Huscarl Dron and the rest of his battle brothers had been was a roiling vortex of biting night air and the hint of a shadow disappearing into the clouds.

Dvalinn was dead too. The war for the Brokkyr home worlds heaved on, taking in every patch of rocky ground in the systems and the gulfs of space between. Together Dvalinn and Bruun had seen too many battles to count. Literally, too many. Where one fight would meld into another, did you count that as one or two? However many they were, Dvalinn had been at his side.

They were the last two. There was never a question it could be any other way.

Dvalinn at least had accounted for some of the humans invading their home. But what were a few dozen enemy in the face of hundreds of thousands?

It had not been the glorious death Dvalinn wanted. A night time camp. An errant sniper. Dvalinn was there; standing, talking, brooding. Dvalinn. A flash and a crack and Dvalinn fell. One shot

took from the universe Bruun's last connection to his home. To who he was.

Dvalinn was gone, and then there was only him. The last of the Brokkyr.

***

He was close now. The end of his journey, where he would deliver his message.

Before him a command tower rose. Matt dark, seeming to drink in the night. Too tall to be a bunker, its height projected ownership of the land around. This far from the front sentries were few and Bruun slipped between their cocky patrols easily, staying to shadows, squeezing between multi-wheeled vehicles, behind them all and into the tower.

The stairs were high, coming nearly to his knees. One final, mercifully small obstacle before the end.

The stairs ended in a bulkhead with a wheeled lock one might see in an old ship. It hung partly open. Bruun stepped silently through into a room ringed by windows, reflective black in the night, and dominated by a central table too high for him to see clearly, but he knew it would hold the map of Brokkyr. Around it; humans. Seven of them. Two in the long brown coats of their officers, the others in the impractical, delicate clothes of those who gave orders to the brown coats.

Bruun's lips curled into a smile, his first in… years? Yes, years.

The humans started at the clank of the heavy door closing. The surprise at seeing Bruun there, in their home, rooted them still.

A few, the ones in the fine clothes, began to chatter in their slight language, directing whatever they said to the two commanders, pointing at him and outside. The two brown coats though did not move. They eyed him warily.

Bruun became aware he was speaking. Reciting names one after

another. *Baalin, Mak, Duala, Ullua, Dram.* His brothers, his sisters, his mother. He spoke as he pulled his gloves free, where he held his message in one palm.

Mikala, Born, Bjorn, Grokla, Tusock.

The brown coats realised they were in danger now, even if they did not know its nature. Urgency overcame fear and they ran to cabinets on the walls, tugging frantically at the handles.

Bruun brought his hands to his front, before his chest, a hand span apart. One facing up, one down. In the lower palm he held his message. A regraded francium-based silica gel. Once pressed the film would break, absorbing into his flesh to react with the water in his body. Molecular bonds would be encapsulated and then shattered driving the nitrogen atoms apart, releasing the primal force which keeps the universe together. A chain reaction would follow through his body, converting the bonds into heat energy, leap frogging onto every other carbon atom for tens of kilometres around, splintering each in turn until there would be nothing but a short lived ball of pure white energy and an explosion to rival the birth of a star.
It was enough revenge for him and Dvalinn to share.

He closed his eyes.

Gvala, Ytuck, Fala, Gron. Dvalinn.

He opened his eyes.

Brokkyr.

And brought his hands together.

For more stories like this, visit Michael's blog at
www.michaelgrey.com.au

It's a Job

by Aaron Magno

The Anvor System was "discovered" by the Corporation several generations ago. It was a profitable part of the galaxy for the Corporation with mining operations set up on a number of the planets, planetoids and moons in the system. Anvor-5 was especially profitable as it was a habitable planet for humans, provided large areas for agriculture and the world's indigenous alien race primarily lived in the planet's most hostile regions away from Corporation operations. Now, however, there was a problem…

The sun was setting as Hiljak made his way to the outskirts of the Marlourne property. Some would have considered the sunset towards which Hiljak rode a beautiful sight but he saw it as only a time piece slowly winding down to an arbitrary end point and he wanted to be heading in the opposite direction before then. Heading home instead of towards another problem requiring his attention; In this instance it was a fault in the irrigation system.

Impatient to learn the precise nature of the problem causing him to delay the end of his working day Hiljak accelerated towards his destination. As he sped up the quad bike beneath him seemed to lurch forward and Hiljak found himself holding on a little firmer. The rows of maquali vines either side of him became nothing more than a blur in his periphery at the new speed while the irrigation tower before him seemed to grow out of the ground as he sped towards it.

Hiljak hit the brakes hard as he came upon the tower, resulting in the quad bike skidding before it came to a stop about ten meters from the tower. A slight smile flashed briefly across his lips having enjoyed that momentary loss of control. He felt silly enjoying such a trivial thing but justified it as something required to break up the monotony of the working day. He was also glad that nobody was around to see him enjoying that brief moment.

Dismounting the quad bike Hiljack looked around his local vicinity.

The maquali vines reminded Hiljak of the grape vines from the plantation he had grown up on except that they were grown to a greater height. Although they were taller the maquali vines barely reached the height of an average human man's shoulders. As such, Hiljak was able to see quite far into the distance as he scanned the area. Not that there was really anything to see this far out from the homestead.

Besides the irrigation tower before him and the other towers he could just make out in the distance the only distinguishable feature was the glow of the plasma fence on the boundary of the property. The irrigation tower was a simple metallic structure that was roughly twice the height of an average man that was divided into three segments. The largest segment at the base of the tower was as wide as five men and had a number of hoses and pipes connected to it. The segment above this was narrower and contained several points of ventilation for the various automated pumps housed inside. The final segment at the top of the tower was even narrower and was tapered to a rounded peak.

Once Hiljak switched off the engine of his quad bike the only sound he could hear was that of flowing water from the direction of the irrigation tower. As he approached the metal structure he initially could not see where the water was coming from but as he made his way around the right side he finally saw the cracked pipe leading from the ground into the irrigation tower. As the water gushed from the pipe, Hiljak looked toward the horizon where the sun had practically faded from view.

In the twilight the glow of the perimeter fence was more pronounced, and heading back to his quad bike to retrieve his tool box, Hiljak could feel a cool breeze blowing, hearing it rustling through the leaves. After picking up his toolbox and taking several steps towards the tower Hiljak sighed as it occurred to him that a little extra light would probably help him in his task. So he returned to his quad bike and started it up. The engine purred to life and Hiljak rode the bike around to the side of the irrigation tower with the broken pipe.

Leaving the engine running and the lights of the quad bike facing the tower Hiljak collected his toolbox once again. As he knelt down beside the cracked pipe he had the opportunity to inspect the

damage with greater scrutiny. It hadn't occurred to Hiljak that the amount of water he had heard flowing from the crack was quite large. In fact the crack was quite large. It didn't even look like a crack but like a large hole that had been gouged into the pipe.

"What could have done that?", Hiljak thought to himself as his eyes went to the glow of the fence on the boundary. He had seen some of the local indigenous wildlife and had no doubt they could do such damage but there was no way they could have gotten past the fence. Puzzled, Hiljak opened his toolbox and took out his multipurpose laser tool. Not wanting to waste time isolating and shutting down the pump responsible for the water flowing out of the hole Hiljak went straight to repairing the pipe. He was going to have to first cut a smooth edge around the hole before welding a metal patch over it, since whatever had caused the damage had caused the metal around the hole to become jagged and twisted.

The small beam of energy being discharged from the multipurpose laser tool was applied to the edges of the hole. Steam was produced when the beam of energy made contact with the water. Hiljak thought to himself that this was going to turn into some hot work and was grateful that the breeze had picked up as he heard the leaves of the maquali vines rustle. That's when time started to slow down for Hiljak and his mind began to race. He had heard the rustling of the leaves over the noise of the quad bike's engine. It would have had to have been a strong wind to be that loud and not the gentle breeze Hiljak felt. He rose to his feet and spun around to face away from the irrigation tower only to be momentarily blinded by the lights of his quad bike.

Moving towards the bike he kept an eye on the rows of maquali vines. Suddenly two shadowy figures burst forward from amongst the vines. Hiljak could barely make out what they were but he had decided they weren't human. In fact, to Hiljak they looked impossibly like giant rats. Madness he thought as his mind struggled to take in everything that was happening.

All thoughts were gone a second later to be replaced by the sensation of pain as acid was sprayed at his face. Hiljak screamed in agony but his mind did not even register that he was making the sound. It barely registered the giant drill that had been rammed into his chest. A moment later Hiljak's brain never registered

another thought or feeling again.

***

Governor Lorray had seen better days. This was in part due to the excesses associated with a successful career, which had made him far less athletic and much more rotund. He had never been a tall man but in all the hours he spent working at his desk he had developed a hunch that reduced his already below average height. All that time at his desk in his office had also affected his skin changing it from a dark olive that almost glowed to a far more pallid tone. He had also begun to notice an increase in the amount of hair gradually falling from his scalp.

Governor Lorray was indeed a long way from the vibrant individual that had taken office but his own shortcomings were not the only things responsible his current of dark days. He stared down at the images displayed on the surface of his desk. Occasionally he would touch the desk's surface with his finger and make a swiping motion across it to reveal the next set of gruesome images. He had already cycled through the pictures of the murdered victims but kept looking down at them to distract himself from the heated argument occurring in front of him. The argument, primarily between District Commander Reenin and Chief Inspector Yvos, had been rehashed a number of times since the discovery of the third victim. By the time the disfigured remains of Hiljak, the ninth victim, were discovered it was clear that neither side was listening to the other. The crux of the argument was whether or not news of the murders should be reported to the Corporation. While all the individuals in the Governor's office were members of the Corporation, they had grown accustomed to a great deal of autonomy during their time on Anvor-5. Having used that autonomy to create a little kingdom for himself District Commander Reenin loathed the idea of an outsider from the Corporation interfering with his business interests in any way. Several of the Sector Chiefs shared Reenin's opinion.

Alternatively, Chief Inspector Yvos believed that the murders had to be reported in order to receive additional assets to deal with this problem. Of course the additional assets would swell the ranks under her command and thereby give her a greater deal of influence in the district. The Sector Chiefs with dead bodies in their sector supported Yvos despite their personal beliefs that it was the

incompetence of her and the local constabulary she led that had failed to protect their interests. At first the Governor was supportive of the District Commander's view as he didn't want his superiors within the corporation interfering with his personal empire but as the number of dead bodies increased he reluctantly yielded to the opposing view of his Chief Inspector. So the message was sent and the Corporation responded by sending the System Commander to Anvor-5. As they waited for his arrival Governor Lorray continued through the gruesome slideshow at his desk. The eight Sector Chiefs stood around the edges of the Governor's office giving Reenin and Yvos plenty of space as they continued their meaningless debate.

"A warship! You brought a bloody warship to our planet," said Reenin in an exasperated manner. "How do you think the other districts are going to feel about having a bloody warship above their heads?"

The Chief Inspector looked down at the man before her. She took a slight pleasure in the fact she was able to look down at her rival despite knowing that part of her advantage in height was due to the thick heels of her boots that were part of her uniform.

"If it wasn't for your inability to see the magnitude of the problem weeks ago the Corporation may have not found it necessary to send such an overt show of force," retorted Yvos with a smirk.

"If you had handled this problem with any kind of competency weeks ago the Corporation would not have even had to get involved," replied Reenin.

The questioning of her competency always stung Yvos, even though she knew that the law enforcement agency she led was poorly equipped to deal with multiple unexplained homicides. Most of the businesses and companies that resided in the district had their own security forces so the district's constabulary rarely had to deal with any crimes they deemed to be serious. They dealt with crimes they deemed to not be serious, such as the trafficking of narcotics, all the time, primarily by accepting the appropriate bribe and looking the other way.

Besides, the profits that everybody enjoyed were built within the

framework of an ordered society and the businesses and companies were capable of punishing an individual who had disrupted the profitability of the district far more severely than the forces of the Chief Inspector.

“If this was within the capabilities of a district’s constabulary I would have handled it but sometimes we’re stretched a little thin having to discipline the youth of today,” said Yvos, alluding to recent trouble the District Commander’s own daughter had with the authorities.

As Reenin began to respond he paused as the attention of everybody in the room was distracted by the flash of red light from the corner of the Governor’s desk. After two flashes a female voice emanated from the desk.

“Governor, the System Commander has arrived,” said the voice.

“Send him…” was all Governor Lorray could say before the door of his office slid open and the System Commander strode in.

The System Commander was a tall and solidly built man. His dark, black hair, which was cut quite short in a fashion those in the military tend to prefer, had only a hint of grey showing. As his steel blue eyes scanned the room with a piercing gaze the others in the room reacted to his presence by trying to come to attention but not being part of the military they could only muster some vague approximation. The Governor, District Commander, the Sector Chiefs and even the Chief Inspector in her uniform represented the political willpower of the Corporation with their ability to persuade through a clever argument or intimidation. Having made his way to the centre of the room the System Commander stood still in his military uniform representing the true power of the Corporation, brute force.

“I am System Commander Mhauss,” announced the room’s most recent arrival as he stared down at the Governor.

“Welcome to Anvor-fi….” began the Governor before once again being interrupted by the System Commander.

“You have a problem. I will solve your problem,” stated Mhauss, “From the evidence and documentation that has been forwarded our analysts have concluded that your district is infested with the most vile plague in existence. Veer-myn. A rodent-like alien race whose ‘civilization’, if you can call it that, leaches off superior societies for survival.”

“Rats? Giant rats!” uttered Sector Chief Bilkis in disbelief. He was not the only one in the room thinking in that manner, just the only one who couldn’t refrain from making an exclamation. While they had all heard rumours and stories of strange alien races none of those from Anvor-5 had contemplated the idea of giant rats being responsible for the recent spate of murders.

“Essentially, yes,” answered Mhauss without diverting his gaze from the Governor, “You have all been very fortunate that you have not had to deal with this pest before. You’re also lucky that the Corporation has experience dealing with this problem and has sent professionals trained for this very task. I’m sure their efforts will ensure this district doesn’t stay closed for too long.”

“Closed?” this time it was the Governor who couldn’t contain himself.

“Yes. The infestation can not be allowed to spread to other parts of the Corporation. To ensure that does not occur all transfer of materials from this district will be suspended immediately,” explained System Commander as he turned to the Chief Inspector, “In fact Corporation troops will be taking up positions at all major ports and border crossings very shortly. It is one of the things I need to discuss with the Chief Inspector as she escorts me to my accommodation.”

“You’re staying planet-side?” asked the Governor.

“Yes. I’m sure the District Commander can arrange something adequate for myself and my staff,” said Mhauss over his shoulder as he headed towards the exit.

“Well, there is a nice resort by the lake that is beautiful this time of year. How many rooms will the System Director be requiring?”

asked Reenin, having found a way to ingratiate himself to his superior.

The System Commander paused and turned his head back to look at Reenin before replying, “All of it.”

With that System Commander Mhauss exited the room with Chief Inspector Yvos following closely behind. District Commander Reenin rolled up his left sleeve to reveal an electronic device that encased his forearm. He began to deftly operate it via several touchscreen panels only pausing occasionally to bark commands into it as he organised the System Commander’s accommodation. The Sector Chiefs congregated in the centre of the room in an agitated manner as they bemoaned their current situation, which would lead to a loss in revenue and possibly a subsequent loss of their jobs. Governor Lorray stared ahead at the door Mhauss had just exited. The System Commander had come and gone like a force of nature, which had turned the Governor’s world on its head. Lorray was very sure of one thing, he had indeed seen better days but the coming days would continue to get worse.

***

The Corporation battle cruiser Unity orbited Anvor-5 at a distance greater than the planet’s artificial satellite system but was far closer than it’s two moons. A plethora of devices on board the Unity were trained at the planet’s surface measuring a number of different aspects. However, not all observations were being made electronically or with any degree of precision. Lozan, for example, merely stared through a window at the planet slowly rotating below him. Officially Lozan was a marine in the Corporation’s vast armed forces. In practice Lozan had a very specific task, eradicate Veer-myn wherever they hid. The last part of that statement, “wherever they hid”, was an important distinction. The Veer-myn presence had increased to the point that they were capable of forming military units comparable in size to anything present in the Corporation’s armed forces. This has led to instances of Corporate forces being engaged with Veer-myn armies in conflicts that can only be described as war. Lozan was not involved in the eradication of Veer-myn at that scale. Instead, Lozan’s role was to hunt down small pockets of Veer-myn infestation whether they occur on ships, space stations or as in the case of the upcoming mission, planet-side

amongst a Corporation colony.

Not being part of the large scale battles that other members of the Corporation's armed forces had engaged in resulted in Lozan and his peers being treated with a certain lack of respect and earned those such as Lozan the somewhat derisive label of rat catcher. As Lozan stared down at the continents that would peak out from beneath the cloud cover he wondered how the inhabitants of Anvor-5 would judge him and his fellow rat catchers. The Corporation does a very good job controlling the flow of information throughout the Great Galactic Co-prosperity Sphere, especially information that doesn't quite reflect the story of prosperity that the Corporation prefers to present. Lozan correctly assumed that the denizens of Anvor-5 had never heard of the Veer-myn until now. Of course, if the rat catchers had been called in then they were now very aware of how dangerous the Veer-myn could be. It was something Lozan and his teammates had been painfully reminded of on their last mission.

The door behind Lozan opened but he did not avert his gaze from the planet below.

"Damn it Loz, do you know how many observation decks there are on this thing?", yelled the newest entrant into the room, "I don't even know what your fascination with those balls of dirt is anyway. Besides we'll be down there soon enough anyway. So come on, we need to get ready."

"I've been ready for the last half an hour," said Lozan as he turned towards his teammate, Abist, at the door.

Both men were dressed in their full combat gear sans their helmets and weapons.

"Loz, you know Sarge, you're not ready till you're strapped in for the drop," said Abist.

Lozan took a final quick glance outside before heading towards Abist and asked his teammate, "You're really not excited about getting planet-side are you? I mean, how long has it been?"

“Teenak-3 and that was horrible,” replied Abist as he moved into the hallway to await Lozan.

“Oh, Teenak doesn’t count. What about Lasduet, I wouldn’t mind getting back there,” countered Lozan as he joined Abist in the hallway.

Lozan continued to make his case as the two of them made their way to the hangar, “I mean, you’ve got natural gravity and a real atmosphere, what’s not to like?”

”Natural? What makes natural so amazing? We’ve made everything better, more refined, more civilised,” said Abist.

“We civilised the air?”, queried Lozan as he paused for a second but not giving Abist enough time to respond, “Well all I know is that I’m looking forward to that natural sunlight, get my tan back. I mean I’m almost as pale as you right now.”

“I’ll grant you that. If spending some time on a planet is the sacrifice I have to make to not be as white as that freak Kosheer then get me down there,” said Abist with a slight chuckle having amused himself at the expense of his absent teammate.

***

Elsewhere aboard the Unity the leaders of the half dozen rat catcher sections that were to be deployed on Anvor-5 were gathered around their superior, Commander Redavnissa. He might have been the most diminutive member at this gathering but as commander he was clearly the most powerful man in the briefing room. His authority was never questioned, at least not publicly. As with all figures in positions of authority what was said by their subordinates behind closed doors never quite matched the public perception.

“…and based on that information we do not anticipate any noteworthy resistance in terms of force. The hardest part of this operation will be locating the targets,” concluded Redavnisa as he touched the flat digital energy panel hovering before him, which he had used to illustrate key pieces of information during his briefing, “Moving to other matters, those of you without complete sections

have been assigned new recruits straight out of the academy."

The Commander reached into his pocket and pulled out eight small black disks, which he proceeded to hand out to some of the team leaders around him. After handing the final disk to Sergeant Grimmon he turned and headed towards the exit of the room where his assistant was waiting. The group of sergeants dispersed shortly afterwards after some meaningless exchanges between the members. Soon only Sergeant Grimmon remained in the room.

The Sergeant was a big man, partly due to his slightly above average height but mostly because he had spent his entire adult life as part of the Corporation's military service. The toned body of his youth was a distant memory but the muscle mass he had built up in those early days remained. He looked older than he actually was and had taken to sporting a thick full beard to hide some of the wearied look on his face. In contrast he kept the top of his head completely shaven. Grimmon looked down at his hand as he slid the black disc between his fingers waiting for his second in command, Corporal Kreesa. He did not have to wait long as Kreesa soon entered the room wearing his combat fatigues with his helmet cradled under his left arm and the sergeant's held in his right hand. Kreesa's colleagues had joked that he didn't need a helmet since his overly stylized hair was so hardened with gel that it would protect him from most projectiles. The corporal didn't mind these jibes as he took pride in his fashionable appearance, even going as far as to wear non-functional glasses with rims as black as his hair.

"So, that's the new guy?" asked Kreesa as he motioned towards the disk.

When his subordinate spoke Grimmon stopped fiddling with it and slid the disk to the centre of his palm. He then tapped the centre of the disk twice and its interior glowed red before projecting an energy screen, which presented the details of the newest addition of his team.

"Mihltuk's replacement, yes," responded Grimmon.

Both men studied the information floating between them before Grimmon spoke again, "Not really a prized recruit is he?"

“We’re rat catchers, we’re never going to get anybody decent. Doesn’t help that Redavnisa’s had it in for us for a while now. I bet the favourite Gorjas got the pick of the bunch,” was Kreesa’s response.

“The best of the bottom of the barrel isn’t really helpful,” said Grimmon, “This Rothis kid has a pretty interesting track record when it comes to dealing with authority and regulations.”

“He should fit right in with the Grim Reapers then,” observed Kreesa.

“Well, we’ll just have to make sure he does,” Grimmon said with a wicked grin.

***

The noise levels in the Unity’s Hangar Bay Seven was so great that everybody working there was forced to shout, which only added to the cacophony within.

“Okay, Okay, power it down. That’s not working,” shouted Weetaub at his subordinate, Lito, who found himself in the unfamiliar position of sitting in the first seat of an APC-13 Warrior.

“Don’t know what to say Weets, diagnostics is giving me nothing. It says everything is green,” Lito yelled in reply.

Standing outside the Warrior Weetaub stared at the flat digital energy panel being projected from the electronic device strapped around his left wrist. From the readings on the display he could clearly see that everything was not “green” but without the diagnostic information from the Warrior itself he had no idea what was wrong. So he did what he always did in this type of situation that had unfortunately become a much more frequent occurrence, he relied on the wisdom of a much older man.

“Ruhk! Ruhk, did you hear that? We have no idea why the phase contran’s output is so low. Can you do something about that?” shouted in the direction of the roof of the Warrior.

A moment later Ruhk stuck his head out over the edge of the Warrior. There were several patches of grease on his head, including a few in his hair that served to darken his greying hair. Looking down at Weetaub he responded, “Well, I could always replace it.”

“If we had a spare unit that’s what we’d do. It’s on order,” said Weetaub.

“It’s been on order for a while now,” countered Ruhk.

“Well, I guess we’re just not that high on the priority list,” answered Weetaub, “now, can you work your magic and do something about increasing the output?”

Ruhk did not reply, he simply repositioned the goggles he wore from his forehead to cover his eyes and returned to the open access panel on the Warrior’s roof. Weetaub shutdown his wrist device’s display and turned away from his APC-13 to look at the other two on this side of the hangar. On the other side of the hanger were three more APC-13s being loaded and readied for transport aboard the Ellison-class landing vessel that was in the middle of the hangar separating the two sets of personnel carriers. As Weetaub surveyed the room he was approached by one of the marines who would be riding in his Warrior.

“You missing a part Weets? I’m sure if you let us know what you’re looking for we could scrounge one up,” offered Ealux.

Ealux, with a heavy laser rifle resting on each shoulder, was leading a procession of marines. Behind him was Haltrough pushing an anti-gravity sled that carried a couple of crates of ammunition. Haltrough was the shortest member of this section of rat catchers but he seemed even more diminutive as he was walking in front of the section’s largest member, Tarvin. The giant of a man had occasionally been described as big as an Orx, which was technically true. In one hand Tarvin was carrying an extra cylinder for his tactical flame unit, while he had another atop his opposite shoulder. Bringing up the rear of this line of rat catchers were Plajon and Kosheer who were carrying a crate of laser rifles between them. It

was unsurprising that the two were sharing a task as they had become very close friends during their time in basic training. They were an unusual pairing, partly because of their contrasting skin tones but also because of the two very different homeworlds they came from. Kosheer had pale white skin that matched the snow of the icy planetoid where he was raised but only made his red hair seem more vibrant. Conversely, Plajon's ebony skin matched the darkened visage of his highly volcanic home planet with it's ash filled skies. What the two shared in common was that they both came from families with a long history in mining and neither wanted to go back to that way of life. While watching the group of marines carrying equipment towards his APC-13 Weetaub briefly considered Ealux's offer before dismissing it.

"No, that's all right, it'll work, Ruhk's just got to make a few adjustments but thanks anyway," said Weetaub before turning back to the Warrior, "Hey, Lito, get out here, we got to check the undercarriage on this thing."
Weetaub had no doubt that Ealux or someone from his group could acquire a replacement phase contran from somewhere aboard a Corporation battle cruiser but he also had no doubt that if found out he would be joining these rat catchers in a cell, something he had no intention of doing.

***

Inside the Warrior Lozan and Abist and were dealing with another problem.

"No, we just put it here like this and it'll be ok," said Abist as he moved a small crate against the wall of the personnel carrier.

"Well, it's not really supposed to go there. In fact, I don't know why we need all this extra food. I mean, we're going to be on a planet with plenty of food, what do we need this for?" questioned Lozan.

"I'm not eating that rubbish, who knows what they eat down there," answered Abist.

"Ignoring the fact that as a Corporation world they'll have plenty of the things you'll eat I'm sure that we've already got enough food in

our standard rations that we've already loaded," countered Lozan, "besides we'll have this battle cruiser above us to resupply us if need be."

"I don't think the Corporation is going to be transporting anything to us that isn't some kind of weapon," responded Abist, "now just hand me that cable so I can strap this thing in."

As Abist fastened the crate to the side of the APC-13 Ealux entered.

"What are you ladges doing?" asked Ealux.

"Space boy here doesn't want to eat the local cuisine so he's packing his own," explained Lozan.

"First off, that's stupid and secondly, just make sure it's secure, I don't want to be hit in the head with that thing in transit," said Ealux, "Anyway, here's your blaster, Loz."

Lozan took one of the heavy laser rifles off of Ealux's shoulders and went over to his seat in the personnel carrier where he began to lock it into place. Tarvin had also entered the Warrior and headed towards the part of the storage which already contained his tactical flame unit that he had stored prior. He only gave Abist a cursory glance as he past. Plajon and Kosheer followed Tarvin aboard with their crate.

"What are you…," Plajon began to ask before being cut off by Abist.

"Look, I'm just bringing a little extra rations. There's plenty of room, it's secure, it'll be fine," said Abist trying not to show his irritation.

"Extra food?" queried Plajon skeptically.

"Yes," responded Abist bluntly.

"How long are you planning on staying down there?" was Plajon's next question but he did not wait for a response, "Just make sure it's empty before we get back. We might not need the extra food but it might come in handy if we need to transport anything back."

Outside the vehicle the sounds of activity had decreased greatly as people paused to witness the newest members of the Corporation Marine Corps be lead into the hangar. All eight of them were dressed head to toe in their brand new combat gear, which included their helmets with the visor down. Having stowed the crates of ammunition aboard the Warrior Haltrough yelled at his squad members inside, "Hey, guys, get out here, they just brought in some replacements"

As the rat catchers exited the personnel carrier it was Ealux as always who was the first to comment, "They look pretty shiny."

"You guys think we'll get one?" asked Kosheer.

"I don't know, I think Geerik's squad is down a couple of guys now. Cansell's been short for awhile now," responded Plajon, "There might not be enough of them to restock all the teams."

"I hope we don't get one of these new grads. I was hoping we'd get somebody with a little experience," said Abist.

"You mean like you had experience?" queried Ealux mockingly, "I don't think we need that kind of experience."

"Hey, at least I had fired a weapon in combat," replied Abist.

The marines around him laughed as they knew the story behind Abist's experience with weapons prior to joining the rat catchers.

***

Grimmon entered the hangar with Kreesa by his side. He saw his men laughing over by their Warrior. Instead of heading directly towards them he went past the group of new recruits.

"Rothis, with me," was all he said when he was within earshot of the recruits but it had the desired effect with one of their number breaking from the group and following him, "And take that damn helmet off. When you're with your team, hell, just when you're with fellow marines in general, take the helmet off because you're going

to want to see the eyes of every man who you might end up in combat with. If you can't see their eyes, you don't know if you can trust them."

Rothis hastily slid up his visor and removed his helmet to reveal his very shortly cut blonde hair. Neither Grimmon or Kreesa turned to look into his blue eyes as they neared the rest of their team. His men didn't come to attention when he approached his squad but Grimmon knew he had their complete attention.

"OK men, there's really not much to tell, they got some rats on the surface and we got to go in and clean the place up. This here's Rothis and he's one of us now, make him feel welcomed as the newest Grim Reaper. Haltrough, he's your buddy, so take him and go find a rifle for him. The rest of you, do what you have to do to be comfortable on the ride down because they want us out of here in," Grimmon paused as he looked at his wrist display, "Twenty."

With that the men dispersed in a flurry of activity with Grimmon and Kreesa boarding the Warrior to inspect it.

Haltrough struck up a conversation with his new teammate as they headed away from the APC-13.

"Well, welcome to the Grim Reapers," said Haltrough cordially, "You're straight out of the Academy, aren't you?"

"Thank you, sir," responded Rothis, "Yes, sir."

"Nah, you only have to call the Sarge that. The rest of us are all kind of equal," clarified Haltrough, "Figured with this many recruits at once you'd all be from the Academy. Well as this is your first assignment, you've probably got a lot of questions."

"Well, I guess the first thing is why do you call yourselves the Grim Reapers?" asked Rothis hesitantly.

"That's because of Sarge. Sergeant Grimmon. Grim. Grim Reaper. On some worlds the Grim Reaper is some kind of representation of death, which sounds pretty cool when you're a marine. I'm not real sure what a reaper is but Ealux assures me it's some kind of farming

thing," explained Haltrough.

"OK, so that explains that but why are we getting me a new rifle? Surely you have enough weapons for a full section," wondered Rothis.

"Well, here's your first lesson, you can never have enough guns. Or ammunition. Or anything really. So when we see the clerk we explain you're new and we're short some gear. Actually, I'll explain, you just be quiet," said Haltrough, "In fact put your helmet back on. That'll play well."

As Rothis obeyed the instructions he realised he was going to be learning a lot of new rules.

***

It was dusk and Corporal Kreesa hoped that their first outing on the planet's surface would be over before it became night. However, the time his sergeant was taking to yell at one of the officials from the local constabulary suggested his superior had other plans. While leaning back against the side of the APC-13 Warrior Kreesa looked around the farmstead they had been assigned to investigate. Off in the distance to his left he could see Abist and Lozan with some of the local constabulary as they made their way around the farm house. In the other direction he had sent Kosheer and Plajon who had to enlist the help of some of the farm workers to get through various gates. Finally, he looked back at Grimmon who was now in an argument with the owner of the farm. His sergeant was a naturally intimidating figure but when he motioned aggressively with his left hand encased in his power glove he was simply frightening. Kreesa just hoped the sergeant knew what he was doing because facing the Veer-myn in the dark was a deadly proposition and an unnecessary risk considering they were investigating some kind of fruit farm.

"Rothis, what do you know about the Veer-myn?" asked Kreesa as he looked over at the newest rat catcher who was looking a little aimless just standing there with his rifle ready.

Rothis turned to face the corporal, "Not a lot sir. Most of what I've

learnt has come just from chatter while I was being transferred. Once people knew what division I had been assigned to they always began telling these stories they had heard. Honestly, I'm not sure what to believe about them."

"What division? You're not part of any division, you're just another one of us lowly rat catchers," remarked Ealux as he shifted his attention from the large pile of discarded fruit that he was crouched over to the two men speaking behind him.

"That's enough, Ealux," said Kreesa sharply, "So what did they tell you?"

"I don't know, all kinds of crazy stuff. They're giant rat things, which is the easiest part to believe because when I was young my family traveled a lot and I've seen all manner of creature. Although they say they're not animals because they can use tools and open doors and stuff. They live on the big cargo vessels and I guess because we're here sometimes on planets. They sneak around and steal things," answered Rothis, "Isn't Ealux right? We're a joke division chasing overgrown vermin."

Kreesa stopped leaning and made a sweeping gesture with his hand as he moved towards Rothis, "Look around you. A section of heavily armed marines, just one of six mind you, that have been sent down to catch some rats. Think about why you're with us, because we lost a man to these overgrown rats. Yes, the Veer-myn use tools and the ones you'll come across like to use giant drills that'll bore through your chest."

"Don't forget those acid spraying guns that'll melt your face," interjected Ealux.

"Those too," continued Kreesa, "this might not be the most respected assignment in the galaxy but it's no joke."

"Sorry sir, I didn't mean..." was all Rothis got out before being interrupted by Kreesa.

"Save it. We're not some elite unit. None of us joined the marines to catch rats but here we all are. Now, you know why you're here and

it's probably for something similar to why the rest of us are here. Just know that what happens here tonight is going to be very serious and very dangerous," said Kreesa.

"Well, unless the Veer-myn didn't find anything they liked here and left the area," countered Ealux as he dropped a piece of fruit and wiped the juices from around his mouth.

"Yeah, then it'll be a peaceful night," responded Kreesa with a slight chuckle.

***

Things had not developed as Sergeant Grimmon had wanted. Having the local constabulary accompanying his men was not how he liked to operate. As he strode purposefully back towards the APC-13 Warrior he had already decided on his next course of action and was immediately communicating to his men via the comm-link located in his helmet.

"OK, everybody back to the Warrior, now! Sprint back if you have to," ordered Grimmon.

The Sergeant did not increase his deliberate pace but as he turned to his peripherals he could see his four men that had been tasked to search the area running back towards his position. There was a combination of bewildered looking constabulary and farmhands following them. Looking ahead he saw Tarvin exit the APC-13 with his flame unit strapped to his back, while Haltrough came running from the other side of the vehicle. Kreesa, Ealux and Rothis were already gathered by the side of the Warrior with their helmets on and weapons ready. When Sergeant Grimmon reached the members of his section near the troop carrier he began addressing them without waiting for the four who were sprinting in their direction.

"Looks like we're going to have a little company on this mission. We'll split into two squads. Rothis, Haltrough, Kosheer and Plajon are with me. The rest of you are with the Corporal. Weetaub will drive Kreesa's team over to one of this place's storage facilities just west of here. There was a nasty Veer-myn encounter out that way about three weeks ago. That's a fairly long time to go without

another Veer-myn sighting in the area but that might just be because those rats are really sneaky or the locals are just blind. So be careful out there. My squad's going to have a look inside the main residency here," said Grimmon before turning to speak directly to the newest member of his section, "Rothis, this is your first live-fire mission and I don't want you getting trigger-happy out there so you're on scanner duty. Haltrough, go help him get kitted out."

As Haltrough led Rothis into the APC-13 Grimmon switched off his comm-link and spoke directly to the men in front of him.

"We're going to want to make sure that we don't have an escort for the rest of our stay on planet. You guys know the drill, load up on starbursts, we want a lot of sound and fury on this one," said Grimmon quite plainly, "Now, if somebody gets hurt during all this then maybe they shouldn't be out here. Are we ready for such an occurrence?"

"Yeah, I got something prepped," responded Ealux.

"Excellent. Let’s get to it," said Grimmon before turning back towards the farmhouse.

He could see the rest of his section approaching rapidly and he moved to meet them. Having exchanged Rothis' rifle for a scanner Haltrough and Rothis exited the Warrior to see their leader walking away. Both men ran to catch up with the sergeant, although Rothis found it a little difficult carrying the cumbersome scanner. The device was similar to a laser rifle in terms of length but the cylindrical main body was slightly wider. On one end of the scanner was a very small radar dish and attached to it's right side was a flat screen that presented the relevant data. Rothis carried it partially by cradling it in his left hand and partly using the handle on the end opposite the dish. As they fell in behind Grimmon Abist and Lozan were about to pass them in the opposite direction.

"Kreesa will fill you in on the details," said Grimmon as he passed by Abist and Lozan, "Just make sure you've got enough starbursts on you."

"Yes sir," replied both men in unison knowing exactly what their sergeant wanted.

Grimmon continued to make his way directly to the farm house. Kosheer and Plajon had run to a point that intercepted the sergeant's path and waited. The two marines were joined by a group of individuals that included the local constabulary, the owner of the farm and some of his employees.

Just before Grimmon reached this gathering he asked, "Rothis, you know how to use one of those things, right?"

"Yes sir," answered Rothis truthfully, despite his experience with the equipment being very limited, "But I'd feel better with a rifle."

"Unfortunately we're kind of going in blind here. The Veer-myn love their tunnels so we're relying on you to find them. When we're in there scan and record everything," said Grimmon, "And if it makes you feel any better you're going to be the first to spot the rats."

Rothis didn't find that information comforting in the least.

***

Having made sure his squad had secured themselves in the Warrior APC-13 Kreesa signaled Weetaub to get moving. The sound of the Warrior's engines coming to life didn't go unnoticed. Inspector Loorhees was the first to comment on the occurrence.

"What's going on Sergeant?" the inspector demanded to know.

"As I said before, we're investigating," was Grimmon’s only response as he continued past the inspector without breaking stride on his way to the farmhouse.

After glancing back at the APC-13 heading off into the distance Loorhees quickly assessed the situation before giving his orders, "Falmus, get out there with the men and follow those marines. Except you, Ronson, you're with me."

As some of the constabulary raced towards their vehicles Sergeant

Grimmon considered the numbers. Kreesa's five man squad would soon have to deal with four nosy constables. Grimmon preferred that situation to his own with the inspector, his assistant, the farm's owner and half a dozen farm workers following him.

"Inspector, you can't let him barge into my home. My family are inside. No incidents occurred in there. Surely my property is beyond their jurisdiction," wailed the farm's owner.

"Nivaas, your farm operates as part of the Corporation. These are Corporation sanctioned soldiers. Everything on this farm is their jurisdiction. They can go where they choose," explained Loorhees even though he wished the sergeant wasn't so rude about the process.

The inspector was well aware the sergeant had no regard for his wishes. This was made perfectly clear when the group of men reached the entrance of the farm house and Sergeant Grimmon turned abruptly to confront Nivaas again.

"Ok, this is your place. You can decide what happens next. My men are going to enter this building. Now, you can either open it up for us or we breach it," said Grimmon in a commanding voice that was just shy of yelling as his men moved to take up positions around the entrance.

"But my family..." whimpered Nivaas.

"Are inside? I know and I'm guessing us breaching the door is going to be pretty terrifying for them," responded the sergeant.

Nivaas sheepishly turned his head to look at Inspector Loorhees but his gaze was not returned. Finding himself without support Nivaas chose to follow the sergeant's orders and open up his home to these marines. As he approached the house Nivaas looked up at the light coming from the large windows on the second level, which was in contrast to the windowless walls of the ground floor. He reached the entrance and paused a moment to stare at something he saw everyday but never really took notice of. The white of the walls seemed brighter than that of the door they surrounded. The touch panel that operated the door was another shade again and it's

location was quite evident despite it's original design to blend in seamlessly with the wall. Nivaas placed his palm against the controls and the door slid open. He turned back towards the sergeant and motioned for him to enter with no degree of enthusiasm.

***

Meanwhile, the marines in the APC-13 reached their destination. As Lieutenant Kreesa exited the personnel carrier he scanned the surroundings, his gun following where his eyes looked. Lozan was the next one out carrying one of the scanners.

"I've got no movement on this thing," said Lozan after completing a full rotation, "well nothing except the local constab and they're coming in fast."

Kreesa knew he didn't have much time before the arrival of unwanted eyes so he had to get organized quickly. The incident report for the previous Veer-myn encounter on the farm stated that they had made a hole in the rear wall of the warehouse. This suggested that there was a Veer-myn tunnel on the other side of the warehouse. The smart thing to do would be to have his men circle the warehouse and examine the area near the Veer-myn's makeshift entrance. It's what the lieutenant wanted to do but instead he went with a plan that would be best to accomplish the sergeant's goals. By this point the rest of the squad had made their way out of the Warrior and Kreesa began to address his men.

"Tarvin, you're on point. I don't like this situation and I want to be ready if any of those furballs are around so, Lozan, I want you right up his butt with that scanner. You see anything, let us know because we might have a real fight on our hands. Abist, you're the rear. Keep an eye on the locals and keep up to date with their movements. Ealux, you're with me until we get inside, then pick a side and hug it's walls. I want you out of sight for any and all surprises," ordered Lieutenant Kreesa.

The marines made their way towards the warehouse. Kreesa looked at the darkened structure before him and then he looked up at what had become the night sky. This first mission had not ended as early

as he liked. He heard the local authorities approach and knew that Sergeant Grimmon was probably going to get what he had planned.

***

Tarvin approached the warehouse cautiously. It was a large structure that he guessed was slightly bigger than the Ellison-class landing vessel the marines had arrived in. The entrance was simply a hole that would easily accommodate two APC-13s entering side by side. That would have been the manner in which Tarvin would have preferred to have entered, safely inside a personnel carrier. No light emanated from the building but light was pouring in from the lights mounted on the marines' weapons and the APC-13 Warrior.

As Tarvin reached the threshold of the warehouse he paused and swung the barrel of his flame unit from left to right, briefly illuminating his surroundings as he did so. Tarvin was standing in the middle of the entrance and was therefore staring down the centre point of the building. To his right were two sets of giant shelving that were filled with barrels as tall as men. On the left side of the warehouse were crates of fruit. Tarvin assumed there was fruit in all of the crates because several of the ones closest to him had not yet been sealed and he could see the fruit in those. The crates were arranged in stacks with square bases that were three crates wide. The height and neatness of the stacks varied but those that were taller and more orderly were generally found towards the rear.

"Loz," was all Tarvin said as he entered the warehouse.

"I got nothing, looks like it's going to be quiet till the locals arrive," responded Lozan as he followed Tarvin inside.

The assurances from his teammate that there were no dangers present did not fill Tarvin with confidence as the scanners weren't infallible. Nevertheless, Tarvin increased his pace as he moved down the central aisle towards the rear and where the Veer-myn had entered. By now the rest of the squad had made their way into the building. The lieutenant followed his two men down the middle while Ealux went straight to the left wall as ordered. Abist was trailing the lieutenant by a few steps. Keeping this spacing was not

a simple task for Abist as he was walking backwards.

"How's our company?" asked Kreesa without turning to face Abist.

"They're just passing the Warrior now," replied Abist.

"OK, hang back and let them pass you," ordered Kreesa, "The rest of you get ready. We might not have found any Veer-myn yet but the night's about to get dangerous."

***

Meanwhile at the farmhouse Sergeant Grimmon and his men were going through the ground floor. Following the search of the rooms on the ground level the squad gathered at the base of a staircase leading to the floor above. At the top of the staircase was the owner of the house. Grimmon glanced up at Nivaas before turning to address his men. A smirk appeared briefly upon the sergeant's face as he thought about how defiant Nivaas looked with the length of the staircase between them. He was also happy with the decrease in the number of people following his men around. Nivaas had moved his family and servants to the upper floor while the farmhands remained outside. This left only Inspector Loorhees and his companion, Ronson, in close proximity.

"Rothis, have you picked up anything?" asked Grimmon.

"I'm detecting life signs and movement on the upper floor, sir," answered Rothis.

"That's just the civilians. If there were rats up there we would have heard the screams by now," explained the sergeant, "You might want to focus below, rats love their tunnels."

"I didn't find any tunnels, sir. There appears to be a basement but it seemed clear," said Rothis.

"We better check it out. Where's the entrance?" was Grimmon’s next question.

"Sorry sir, I'm not sure," said Rothis as he fiddled with the scanner,

trying to go through the recorded data to find the information.

"Never mind," grunted Grimmon as he turned to look up at Nivaas, "We're going into your basement. Where's the entrance?"

Nivaas hesitated momentarily before answering as he still did not like having the sergeant and his men having further access to his house, "There's an access panel at the back of the pantry."

"Hal, can you lead us there?" asked Grimmon as he turned back to his men without acknowledging Nivaas' assistance.

"Yes sir," confirmed Haltrough.

"Let's get moving then," ordered the sergeant.

As the marines headed towards the pantry Nivaas descended the stairs. This did not go unnoticed by the sergeant.

"It's probably best if you remain upstairs," said Grimmon over his shoulder as he followed his men.

"Unfortunately you'll need me to open the access panel," responded Nivaas.

Now it was Sergeant Grimmon that paused for moment. They didn't need Nivaas to get through the access panel but it was going to be the method of entry that was the least upsetting to the locals. Having already established his authority through aggression Grimmon decided it was time to take a lighter approach as not to completely alienate the locals.

"Ok," was Grimmon's simple response to Nivaas before turning back to the direction of where his squad had exited.

***

Tarvin was once again outside the warehouse having exited through the hole created by the Veer-myn. Lozan was beside him pointing the scanner at the rows of trees before them. Through the gaps between the trees the two marines could see the slight glow of the

perimeter fence in the distance.

"I'm not picking up anything moving out there either," said Lozan, "I'd like to find that Veer-myn tunnel but not tonight. I can barely see anything out here."

"I know what you mean. It's going to be even harder when we..." replied Tarvin before pausing to activate his comm-link, "...kill the lights! Kill the lights!"

With those words both the marines outside and within the warehouse switched off their mounted lights. Even Weetaub in the Warrior switched off its external lights. The only light sources that remained were the portable lights carried by the four constables.

"Kill the lights!" yelled Kreesa at the constabulary.

"What?" was Falmus' confused response.

"Switch off your lights!" ordered Kreesa.

The four constables complied without knowing what was going on. Their confusion soon turned to fear as a giant stream of fire flashed across the hole in the warehouse wall they had been approaching.

"What's going on?" asked Falmus in a panicked voice.

"Veer-myn! Get some cover!" was all the lieutenant yelled as he shoved Falmus into a stack of crates.

Outside Tarvin continued firing his flame unit wildly. Lozan had put down the scanner and had a pair of starbursts in his hands. These black cylindrical devices were about the size of his fists with buttons on the top. After activating one in each hand Lozan threw both towards the hole. One hit the wall while the other went through to land near the lieutenant and the constabulary. Both burst open releasing an incredible amount of light. This sudden release of light did not affect the marines as their visors were designed to filter out that wavelength of light but the constabulary were temporarily blinded. This period of blindness was extended as Ealux tossed a few more starbursts into the air that burst above the

constables. Kreesa fired his rifle in an arc above the hole. Abist ran to be alongside his lieutenant and fired in a similar fashion. As he ran to this position he knocked down one of the disorientated constables.

"Fall back!" screamed Kreesa as he stopped firing to throw a starburst a small distance in front of himself.

Abist had also stopped firing and turned to grab one of the constables in order to pull him towards the APC-13. Moments after Kreesa's starburst exploded Lozan came through the hole with Tarvin right behind him. As Tarvin re-entered the warehouse he turned to fire upon the wall of the warehouse, setting it ablaze.

"Get the civilians to safety," ordered the lieutenant as he began firing through the hole into the empty night.

Falmus didn't particularly like being called a civilian but in his confused state he wasn't capable of arguing. Lozan tossed another starburst before helping Falmus to his feet and dragging him to the exit. Tarvin had stopped using his flame unit and ran past his lieutenant who was still discharging his weapon. Like his fellow marines Tarvin threw a starburst into the air before grabbing one of the constables and leading him towards the warehouse's entrance.

Ealux had made his way to the central aisle from his position by the wall and was approaching the only constable not being escorted out of the warehouse. The constable slowly stumbled towards the exit until finally tripping over as a starburst exploded at his feet. As the constable tried to get to his feet Ealux threw an object at the prone man. The object was similar in size and shape to a starburst with a trigger on the top but it's body was glass through which a yellowy green acid could be seen. The object burst open in front of the constable's face and the acid burned the man's skin. The constable screamed in agony. Kreesa grabbed the constable's arm and pulled him towards others who were gathering. Ealux continued to dispense starbursts as he followed his lieutenant out of the warehouse.

***

In the basement of the farmhouse Inspector Loorhees was the first to be informed about the situation at the warehouse. Shortly afterwards Grimmon was contacted over his comm-link by Kreesa. The manner in which each man responded to the news was vastly different. Shock was the first emotion displayed on the inspector's face but it swiftly changed to anger as he looked over at the sergeant.

"Ronson, with me, now!" ordered Loorhees as he made his way out of the basement, "Nivaas! Nivaas! Where the hell have you gone?"

The sergeant showed no visible signs of emotion as he calmly listened to his second in command explain the situation. When he had finished speaking to the lieutenant he turned to address his men.

"Looks like one of the locals got hurt. Weets is taking him to the nearest medical centre," said Grimmon, "I guess we're going to have to hike it home."

***

Amongst visitors to this region of Anvor-5 the Country Spring Resort was one of the most popular choices of accommodation. Normally it's grounds would be filled with tourists enjoying the resort's luxurious amenities such as the restaurant or pool area. Various members of the business community would be meeting delegates from any number of different systems that make up the Great Galactic Co-prosperity Sphere in Country Spring's numerous conference rooms.

This was far from Country Spring's current state which had been in place since System Commander Mhauss had commandeered the premises. The restaurant had been converted to a mess hall. The pool area was deserted as could be seen by the system commander as he looked down at it from the resort's main conference room. Mhauss had his back to the interior of the room, which contained a large table that could accommodate up to twenty delegates. None of the seats, including the system commander's larger and more ornate seat, were occupied.

Although the conference room was being utilized it was not being used to host some complex business negotiation. In fact there was only one viewpoint to be held in this room and it was being clearly expressed on the opposite side of the table behind Mhauss by Commander Redavnisa.

"Grimmon, you're an idiot!" shouted Redavnisa, "I've never met an individual as incompetent as you."

The sergeant stood there completely still and straight in the face of abuse from his direct superior. Lieutenant Kreesa stood beside his sergeant in the exact same pose. Both men stared directly ahead and out the same window Mhauss was looking. Dealing with two men who had taken on the attributes of statues did not take any spirit away from Redavnisa's angry tirade.

"I should demote you, Grimmon, but you're already at the bottom of the barrel," continued Redavnisa, "If I got rid of you I'd have to promote this fool and then I'd have to demote him and promote one of the other clowns you command because nobody wants to transfer into your group of incompetent imbeciles."

The commander took a breath before continuing.

"I should send you out to one of the active war zones. With your record nobody would want you because you're a liability. Who'd want to have you around endangering their lives. I've seen good, brave men die out there while you continue to bumble around bringing disgrace to the service," Redavnisa said as he turned his back on his men, "I should be out there leading men of courage, men with talent, instead of the likes of you."

A smile passed briefly across the System Commander's face as the idea of Redavnisa out on the front lines almost made him laugh. Mhauss knew that the commander of the rat catchers was hardly a prime candidate for a field division. It was the one drawback of taking up the comfortable position of system commander in a safe system, having to deal with the incompetent.

"I can't believe we sent your team to the oldest Veer-myn encounter site, one we assumed was abandoned and you're the first team to

come across those vile creatures," said Redavnisa as he raised his hand to his face and placed his thumb and forefinger to his opposing temples, "And then you couldn't even hit one. A squad of marines couldn't even hit a single rat. You managed to burn down a building but couldn't even wound one of them."

"Sir, none of my men were wounded either. Sir," interjected Sergeant Grimmon.

"There's a man in hospital who would argue that point," countered Commander Redavnisa.

"Sir, he's not my man. If we hadn't been burdened with looking after non-combatants we could have...," Grimmon began to explain.

"Shut it Grimmon," was the commander's only response.

Before Redavnisa could continue a light flashed on the conference table in front of the system commander's chair. Mhauss turned and pressed the spot on the table from which the light was coming.

"Mhauss," was all the system commander said.

"Sir, Governor Lorray is here with his local delegation. Should I send them up, sir?" asked a voice from a point at the center of the table.

With both of his arms leaning against the table Mhauss looked up at the three marines in front of him and answered, "Yes, send them up. We're almost done here."

"Yes sir," was the response of the disembodied voice emanating from the table.

"Finish this up commander," ordered Mhauss.

"Yes sir," answered Redavnisa before turning back to his charges, "Grimmon, you're confined to your quarters until further notice. Kreesa, you're in charge of the section. Your new assignment will be monitoring the space port. You'll have the D and D shift. When your section is not on duty you will all be confined to your quarters."

Redavnisa turned his head in Mhauss' direction, "System commander?"

"You two are dismissed," was all Mhauss said.

"Yes sir," was the unified response of the two reprimanded marine before they turned and exited the room.

Both the sergeant and the lieutenant walked towards the elevator without uttering a word between them. As they approached the elevator the bell signifying it had reached their level sounded. When its doors began to open the sergeant turned to his subordinate and gave him a look that suggested that their luck had started to turn, albeit in a small way.

Emerging from the elevator were two armed marines who were followed by Governor Lorray and a number of local officials. Grimmon and Kreesa pressed themselves against a wall to allow the group to pass before making it to the elevator. A woman at the rear of the group of local officials stepped away from the group and turned back to the departing marines.

"Sergeant Grimmon?" asked the woman.

The sergeant turned in the doorway of the elevator and answered despite being unsure why he was being asked to identify himself, "Yes."

This exchange drew the attention of the other officials who paused and watched the woman approach the sergeant. While the woman was relatively tall Grimmon still towered above her, which made her next action all the more shocking as she punched him in the face. Sergeant Grimmon reeled back staggered by both the physical impact and unexpected nature of the blow.

"You degenerate piece of...," yelled the chief inspector as she wound back for a second swing

"Yvos!" screamed the governor.

Kreesa had placed his body between Chief Inspector Yvos' and his sergeant's and was fortunate that District Commander Reenin was able to hold Yvos back before she could deliver her next strike. The elevator doors closed, which separated Grimmon and Kreesa from the others.

As Grimmon rubbed the sore side of his face he said, "At least I'm confined to my quarters and the men won't get to see my bruised face."

Both men began to laugh.

Breach

by Michael Grey

Containment Protocol - Incident Ref#: 0000037..Time Stamp - minus 00:56

There was Dreadball on the entertainment screen. There was always Dreadball on the entertainment screen. Cole wasn't a fan, and knew he was in the minority because of that, but it was hard to appreciate the sport when you saw the net result of skirmishes between rival fans in the emergency room. He counted himself lucky Gaian 16 was too new a colony to have its own team. When that momentous day came he could kiss every Saturday night goodbye for the rest of his working life.

The screen had attracted a usual crowd of roughnecks, gathered at the carriage's end while the monorail threaded its way through Gaian Prime's precincts. They cheered at some especially brutal impact, and then animatedly rated it against the one from last night or the night before.

Cole yawned and looked through the window. Gaian Prime slid by, made clean and almost palatable by velocity. It was only when the 'rail halted at a station did the ever presence litter and algae staining show itself before they moved off, blurring to the uniform grey of plasticrete Sphere-wide.

Just another day in the outer colonies.

He closed his eyes and leant into the seat. Was this really what he'd wanted? Being part of the push outwards from the core worlds had seemed so enticing at the recruitment office. So romantic. Graphs of rolling plains, infinite horizons. The taming of frontiers. Becoming self-sufficient, away from the meagre hand outs of the corporations.

And instead; this. Pretty much held hostage in a Bubbled city until his passage was paid off and he could go…. Where? Another establishment colony like Gaian? As far as he knew, this was as

good as it got out here.

He opened his eyes when the game cut off mid-play, replaced by the preened face of a man with a forced grin to the jeers of the fans below.

When the face spoke it was with the stilted delivery of a facet recording, separate sound files spliced to play a coherent message. "Good morning, fellow Gaians! This is Kamal McMahon, the governor of Gaian 16 and your public servant, wishing you a pleasant morning. The temperature is currently 33 degrees in our fine city, climbing to a high of 44 with a humidity of 80 percent, so be sure to keep cool and drink plenty of water. Enjoy your day, and remember; each one of you is as indispensable to the colony as I am." An insincere wink and he was gone. One of the teams had done something in the meantime to cause the men below to swear. One spat on the floor. Cole yawned again.

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Gaian Prime General Hospital heaved. One of the first municipal buildings constructed on the fledgling colony, and built to serve the bare minimum the corp protocols demanded for the resident numbers at the time. It was pretended the inevitable population boom would ever come, credits changed hands, the right boxes were ticked and due diligence was seen to have been observed.

Fast forward thirty years and the original hospital still stood, as recognisable in design as the day the doors opened, if not in the queues of sick and injured leading out from every door, laying and sleeping on moss-covered pavements in an intangible race between their turn and possible death.

Cole rushed from the change room to surgery, pulling on sterile whites and securing a facemask. He had been early for his shift, but time and industrial accidents wait for no one and the previous shift's nurses were still in other theatres.

He reached the ER door as another nurse arrived, pulling a wheeled and battered halogen light. "Morning Cole. Just in time." She nodded at the door. He opened it with a flamboyant wave.

“What do we have Jean?” He followed her through into a surgery mid-prep. Empty boxes of medicines, syringes and the like leaned stacked against the walls. Other boxes and discarded wipes lay around them, kicked to one side by busy medicos to clear the floor around the central table and left for a clean up the room was always too busy to receive. Cole caught a glimpse of green fingering its way out from behind one of the stacks. Even here the omnipresent algae found root.

“Male, 23, slipped with a circular saw and caught it in the upper intestinal tract.” As she wheel the light into position the surgical covering on the bed shifted and emitted a pained cry which descended into a groan. “Anaesthesia’s still setting in,” she finished.

At the table a doctor leant over the patient, hands busy and out of sight. He looked up at the light as the nurse aimed it down. “And what’s this?”

“Industrial light from the construction next door,” she said. “The builder’s haven’t arrived yet and I don’t think they need it as much as him.” A nod to the table.

“No hospital ones…?” the doctor let the question trail hopelessly. “At least tell me it’s clean.”

“Sprayed it twice with disinfectant, Doctor.”

He accepted that with a nod and noticed Cole. “Ah, good, an extra pair of hands, we can begin. If you wouldn’t mind nurse.” The doctor looked back down and administered an injection. Cole ripped off a salute only Jean saw. Her eyes crinkled and she waved him to stop.

She connected the light as he pulled a tray of implements to the table, and then pulled over the G-Net screen. It hung suspended from the ceiling, allowing Cole to angle it over the now-unconscious patient’s head. The screen blinked, clicked, prompted Cole for a password which he gave, and then connected to the greater-network. The screen showed a doctor in theatre whites.

“Please state the nature of the procedure,” it said in an accentless voice.

Without looking up the doctor said, “Male, mid-twenties, basic none augmented, no known allergies. Patient has multiple clean lacerations through the upper intestine between the transverse and ascending colon caused by an industrial saw.”

“Is the patient stable?” the screen doctor asked.

The doctor looked at Cole who checked the vital readout. “He is.”

The G-Net screen flicked as files were access, then segued to the image of the screen doctor bent over the representation of a patient with similar injuries. “Begin by removing obstructions and cleaning the wounds.”

“All done,” said the doctor.

The screen flicked again, fast forwarded to a later phase. “The intestinal lacerations can now be cauterised. Begin by-”

Cole looked up. So did the doctor and Jean. The screen showed black with bold white letters saying 55760 ERROR – CONNECTION UNAVAILABLE. The full stop blinked off and on while they watched.

Cole reached out, used his index knuckle to turn the screen off and back on.

Nothing.

The doctor looked between the patient and the screen again. “Try again nurse.” Cole did to the same effect. He saw a sheen across the doctor’s forehead. The G-Net had ever gone down before, and without it they would have to rely on themselves and what little training they had.

The doctor blinked.

“Aesthetic will wear off in just over 90 minutes, doctor,” said Jean. She sounded calmer than Cole felt.

“Very well.” The doctor coughed and shook his head. “Nothing we haven’t done before, I’m sure we’ll be fine. Charge up the cauteriser, we’ll begin there.”

***

Fifteen hours later in a bar off Landing Square, Cole downed his second beer to try and calm his shaking hands.

“I still don’t see what your problem is.” Jean sat opposite him, still on her first drink.

“I think you would had you been onplanet as long as me. I’ve had to remind that doctor to wash his hands before an op once.” He forced swallowed the beer. Light and fizzy; cheap to make and easy on the hangover. Just as the colonies liked it.

“I think you’re exaggerating.”

He wasn’t. “How much training did you have? When you were in the recruitment office on whatever world you came from. When you looked down the list of required jobs, had you had any medical training?”

She shook her head. “You know I didn’t.”

“And neither did I. Nurse, sounded fun and a few pay grades above shit shoveller. A completed aptitude test and basic training on route and bam, in at the deep end. Do you know how much extra training a doctor needs here?”

She didn’t answer, just sipped her drink and let him get it off his chest.

“They have to complete basic medical school. *Complete*. Not *pass*. If Doctor Hygiene back there was anyway competent he wouldn’t be on this armpit of a world.”

“He can’t be that bad. He patched that boy up without the G-Net telling him how.”

“Lucky for the poor son of a bitch it was something we’d done before with no complications. I dread to think what happens if the G-Net’s not back up tomorrow.”

Jean looked uncomfortable and he felt she was resisting the urge to look at her watch. That was when he realised how drunk and bitter he sounded.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Just letting off steam. It’ll be better tomorrow.”

***

The monorail home was as packed as that morning, only this time the sports fans beneath the vid screen were actually drunk instead of just acting like it.

Cole tried to tune them out, closing his eyes to the Bubble’s ever present orange glow. He gave up when a crushed beer can clattered down the carriage.

He opened his eyes and his attention was drawn to the noise coming from the crowd. It was different from this morning. He paid more attention and realised it wasn’t the score line they were swearing at.

“Same bloody game as Monday, mate. Saw it myself.”

They’re repeating a game? Cole did not know much of Dreadball, but what little he did included that there were enough teams to show several live games each night. A repeat was something he had never heard of.

On the screen armoured athletes threw themselves violently into each other as a ball sped by at sub-sonic speeds. It could have been any game. He didn’t even know the team colours.
He closed his eyes again and tried to ignore the noise.

***

His apartment building was silent. This time of night most of the occupants would be asleep or at night shifts outside of the Bubble, farming the ultra-growth vegetation before it could grow back.

He reached his apartment, key card ready, when he saw the tape on the door frame. Just a short strip of clear cello tape, half hanging as if someone had unstuck it from their fingers as they passed. Easy to miss and easy to explain.

Or, in this case, with a different meaning. He sighed. He really just wanted his bed before the shift tomorrow. Instead he walked to the next door and rapped lightly. No answer. He tried again and leant in. "Cas?"

His own door opened a crack. "Here," said a voice.

He looked between the two doors. "What are you-?" he began.

"Shh! Get in here."

The door opened wider showing nothing but darkness beyond, no sign of the person holding the door. He walked in. "Don't mind if I do, it being my apartment."

A hand shot out, grabbed his shirt and pulled him all the way in. The door closed fast, just short of slamming. He stumbled in, looked at the back of the figure peering through the security hole. She held a hand out toward him, waving down in a 'keep quiet' motion. He did, forcing back another sigh.

After a second of nothing happening the figure turned around. "Coast clear, you can turn the lights on."

"Why thank you very much." He was used to his neighbour's paranoia-driven decisions. Breaking into his apartment was a new one, but he'd known her long enough to not be surprised. Her position with the military gave Cas access to training which allowed her to indulge in her conspiracy theories, 'And lets me keep an eye on the bastards' she would remind him.

But when he flicked the switch he got a surprise. A heavy looking pistol was holstered at her hip. He had grown used to the absence of weapons. Firearms where illegal inside the city, and to see one made him uneasy.

“You, er, you supposed to be wearing that off duty?”

“No.” She pushed passed him to the lounge windows and pulled back the blinds to look outside. “It’s not the Marine’s, I have to check those in. This is mine.”

“Well that’s a comfort. Tea? Boil the water twice.”

“Boil the water twice.” She said it at the same time and gave what was planned to be an angry look but which quickly turned into a grin.

He made himself busy in the kitchenette. “To what do I owe the pleasure? Not that I don’t mind visitors but I usually like them to arrive after me.”

“It’s happening,” she said from the window.

“It’s always been happening, at least if I were to believe you the other times too.”

“This time I’m right.”

He looked at her while she peered outside. The gun was still secured in its holster, but just having it there she risked her job or even being shipped to a penal colony.

“And what’s so different about this time?”

She left the window, came to the kitchen bench and slid her tablet along the top to Cole. He picked it up. “And?”

“Check the mails,” she said. He did. Her inbox was a barren affair, a few reply prompts from obviously fake G-Net handles, some spam. Nothing personal. But at least regular mails, a few every

hour. But nothing from the past day.

He pulled out his own and checked. The past day was empty also, the last refresh showing as 7:36am, about the same time the G-Net went off in surgery.

He tried connecting. Nothing. It showed connection to the local network, but nothing more, nothing from the Sphere.

He looked at Cas. "It's not just that," she said and picked up the TV remote. She flicked on the major news channel. What should have been rolling reports from across the Sphere showed some local news story from a satellite township. Instead of trade wars, some plans for an enclosed highway. She flicked to the next channel to show something similar. "It's the same with each. Reruns of everything already shown. The only live stuff is from onplanet. Even the-"

"-Dreadball," he finished staring at his tablet.

She smiled as if she had just won something. "You're learning."

He didn't like feeling as if he was being played with, but that annoyed him perhaps more than it should. He put it down to stress and an increasing need for sleep, and refused to entertain the thought he might be worried. "It doesn't have to mean anything. So we lost connection to the greater network, so what?" He ran his hand through his hair and poured them tea.

But even if it didn't mean something the notion was, if not worrying then... disquieting. Not unlike waking up to find your apartment door locked from the outside and phone disconnected.

"Do you know just how many satellites orbit this planet?"

He shook his head and sipped his tea. "Three? Five? How many do you need for a small operation like this?"

"An operation of 300 million people requires not less than 250 active sats at any one time. Council protocol. We have 275, a relay station the size of a small moon powered by a dedicated fusion reactor, and a backup to that on a further orbit. A planet does not

just drop off the G-Net, Cole."

She sounded so sure. And something else. He shook his head. Cas burned with the need to tell everyone she met her conspiracy theories, be they about the suppressed news of planets successfully overthrowing their corporate yokes or secretive council death squads. They all came down to how the Sphere citizens were covertly controlled. As if they needed anything more covert than 24-hour Dreadball and reality head-cam shows.

Exhaustion made his eyes burn. "I'm sure it's no big deal. I mean, we can't perform any major surgery without it, I'm just not sure it means anything."

"The hospital's down?"

"Well, yeah. They all share the same connection."

"Just after Seven thirty?"

He guessed where she was going. He was wrong.

"The defence force's connection is down as well."

It took a moment for him to realise what she meant. "The Marines'?"

She nodded. "They're trying to make like there's nothing wrong, and not doing it very well. As of this morning all leave has been cancelled and everyone's been recalled to Prime. That's the first directive for any commanding officer in a tactical situation with no intel: secure your base."

The frightening thing was she made perfect sense. He cut the thought off before it could take root. It was late, he was tired and Cas was on one of her paranoia rants. But he knew better than to argue with her, and even if he wanted to he didn't have the energy.

"Okay, let's say *it is happening*," he air quoted. "What do we do? And more to the point; why? Gaian's only export is refried vegetable mush. We're not near any trade routes or other planets,

we have little military presence. So why?"

"Why is the great question, partner, but knowing we have to find a 'why' is half the fight." She picked up her tea and downed the hot drink in a single pull. Cole winced. "I'm just letting you know. Keep your eyes open, eh?" She went to the door and performed a complicated but well executed check outside before leaving.

His head swam. He didn't believe Cas, of course he didn't. He had become used to her theories, and none of them ever eventuated. But still, the idea of being cut off from the Sphere made him uncomfortable. He had never felt so… disconnected.

He lay down, and when it became obvious sleep would never come, spent the rest of the night flicking through TV channels.

***

The G-Net was still down. Procedures at the hospital had been reprioritised to emergencies first and then anything the doctors felt competent enough to perform without guidance second. But there was another problem.

"What, none?"

"Ran out last shift," said jean.

"But none? No anaesthetic in the whole hospital?"

"Frak, I don't know! That's why you have to go check. You're more senior, they'll take you more seriously than me."

All anaesthesia had been used up in the continuous procedures and operations throughout the last night, according to Jean. He had known they were running low, but then again that was nothing new. The hospital was always running low, but amongst the constant flow of ships and supplies coming in from outsystem to feed an establishing world were the primary supply ships from the corp home planets, stocked with munitions for the marines and medical supplies for the hospitals. The ships' arrivals were reliable enough that Cole had long accepted the state as a norm.

The situation was confirmed by the supply office manager.

“Not a goddamn one, and will you people please stopping asking for them.”

She looked harried. Her face red with strands of hair dangling loose from her ponytail. Behind her the small warehouse looked bare. Skeletal shelves which should have held pallets of boxes were empty, allowing him to see all the way through them to the building’s rear.

“You do realise,” he began.

“Yes I realise exactly what you can and can’t do without them. I’ve been told a hundred times in two hours, but it does not change that we don’t have anything.”

Cole closed his eyes and told himself to calm down. When he opened them again he tried to think logically. “When was the last shipment due?”

“Yesterday afternoon,” she said without checking. He guessed she’d been asked this a hundred times as well.

When she didn’t offer anything more he said, “And? Where is it?”

She stopped scribbling on her pad and banged her pen onto the counter. She looked at him above the rim of her glasses. “If I knew that I would have told you. It just didn’t come in, and I don’t have anyone spare to go find out why.”

“Then I’ll do it. Where do I go?” He said it before he realised, but then again what else was he going to do today?

She looked at him a moment longer, then, “Okay.” She pulled a sheet from her clipboard and wrote an address before handing it over. “This is the delivery warehouse the goods come from. By all means go find out. And if it’s anyone’s fault down there, feel free to use your knowledge of pain receptors and pressure points on them.”

***

Gaian 16 held several advantages for potential corp settlement. It was located on the brink of a stellar cliff, known locally as The Edge. Near the leading verge of the galaxy arm, it was as close to a true void as any habitable planet yet found by the Sphere. A settlement there could prove invaluable in the future as a testing post for intergalactic travel or weapons which could react badly with any nearby mass.

Secondly, a peculiarity of evolution had given the planet's vegetation a heavily accelerated growth cycle. Plant growth cut back would grow back to its original size within a day. The potential for farming was quickly identified, prompting a short but cut throat bidding war for the planet's contract. And now Gaian 16 was the main provider of reconstituted vegetable matter across the Aquila Rift.

The unique ecology, however, provided equally unique challenges. The floral growth was so accelerated as to be almost predatory. No mega fauna existed anywhere on the planet, and it had been postulated that the ecologically advanced vegetation literally strangled any large animals before they could find an ecological niche. This meant humans had to force themselves sideways into the ecosystem.

The same boon to agriculture, where a patch of ground could be farmed for all vegetable matter to shipped off world one day and would be there next for the same treatment, also meant any settlement had to be actively defended from an ever encroaching rainforest. Burn backs and soil eradiation were daily chores around each township. But even then the plant life found a way, until mould and fungus would find a hold within a structure and grow, eating mortar and forcing apart prefab blocks until the building was unsafe and would have to be demolished and rebuilt.

In a township which might consist of two dozen buildings this was not much of a problem. But when it came to what would be Gaian's capital city, Gaian Prime, the area and building number and size meant a different approach was required. And this was where the Bubble was designed.

An immense conductive alloy canvass, the Bubble stretched over the whole city, anchored at Prime's circumference by being driven eight metres into the ground. The Bubble secreted toxins and was charged with direct current, nullifying any spores or seed which came into contact with it, and allowing the burn back teams which patrolled the perimeter daily, to focus on the plants and not on the buildings on the inside.

The Bubble also provided a secondary benefit to Prime's residents. The mega trees found on the interior of Gaian 16's continent released wind-borne spores year round. These ranged in size from the bacterial, to the width of a man's fist. The larger variety popped on contact, releasing pollen motes in the millions, each species of which had proven to cause extreme hay fever-like symptoms.

Gaian Prime's location was on the edge of a natural harbour. The bay was most likely an ancient meteor crater, forming an almost perfect circle open at one side to a deep water channel between two of Gaian 16's oceans. The location was perfect for settlement, not only in a naturally calm bay, but also the city built at the bay's eastern shore would face its own harbour westward, away from the prevailing winds from the landmass's interior, and allow the only permanent opening in the Bubble around the sea lane.

It was on this harbour where Prime's warehouse district was located, and where Cole now arrived.

There were dozens of warehouses, the smallest still more than 50 metres wide, and all following the curve of the shore around the bay. And outside each were knots of people. He caught a whiff of the crowd's collective emotion. Anger permeated, but he sensed that just rode the wave of something more substantial beneath.

He followed the directions to the building where the hospital supplies should be held. Judging by the clothes worn by the people gathered outside this one distributed supplies for most of the city's municipal services. And going by how hard they shouted and the words they used it was not just the hospital which had run out.

A man in stood on a pile of pallets at the office's door, speaking loudly and trying to answer three questions at once. Sweat stains darkened around his chest and armpits and he looked if he had had less sleep than Cole.

Without seeing inside he knew the warehouse would be empty. Behind what he took to be the manager, smaller knots of workmen in overalls and heavy gloves lounged around. With nothing to do they talked and cast the occasional worried look to the crowd.

"I wondered how long it would take you."

Cas leant casually against a linked fence, arms crossed with a sardonic smile. She wasn't wearing her pistol, but she was in uniform.

"What you doing here?"

"Seems to be where all the action is." She indicated the crowd. "I wouldn't try and force your way to the front, if I were you. Most of them have been here for a while. It wouldn't take much for them to turn ugly."

He had reached the same conclusion, but was not in the mood to play games. "Noted. But why are you here?"

"Same reason you are, I'd say."

He frowned. "Supplies."

"That's affirmative."

"But… what do the military need supplied?"

"Ammo," she said simply. And when she saw his questioning look, "Did you think we just sit on an ever growing pile of munitions? Ninety percent of what we have is used in training. Since this morning that's been stopped though. No more deliveries have come in."

He frowned. The military would get priority even over the

hospitals in corp supply lines.

“Let me show you something.” She stepped away, showing the spot she had leant on hid a freshly clipped flap in the chain link. She saw Cole looking and shook her head in a *don’t ask questions* way, and he pushed his way through.

The fence led to a gap between two warehouses, opening out on the waterfront. The air flowed more freely here, not nearly as close and with a grating edge of salt to the warm breeze.

Cargo ships with their typical flat-nosed prows lined the wharves, each almost as large as the buildings they docked at. Every berth was occupied, accompanied by imposing cranes. Here and there trucks were parked in designated bays, toy-like between the monolithic loading equipment and ships.

But no people.

The entire scene, kilometres of dock front, still and silent but for the slap of the waves on piers.

The quiet was unsettling. Cole had been on Gaian for years, and he had never seen such calm, such stillness since arriving onplanet.

The calm continued out to sea. Ships, as many as where in dock now, lay at anchor with nowhere to go.

“It’s the same at each warehouse as here,” said Cas. “All the workers are either standing around or have been sent home. There’s nothing for them to do.”

“But why?” he said.

Cas pointed out over the bay, towards the hole in the Bubble where ships could sail freely out to the stretch of open ocean. Outside of the bay a ten kilometre wide channel separated the mainland from an island designated as Gaian’s spaceport. It received and launched the super lifters from the upper atmosphere. Set outside the city for safety reasons, its own seaport allowed the constant flow of goods from outsystem to Gaian to be shipped directly to Prime or the

outlying townships. The returning 'lifters were loaded with vegetable matter for shipping to other sectors and systems.

Cole had only been at the port once on the day of his arrival, but it left him with the profound impression of a structure the size of a city, designed and built for the sole purpose of constant unloading and loading, never ceasing, as if it were the lungs of the colony planet.

Only right now, it was as still as the dock he stood on.

"That's not right." Only after he said the words did he realised he whispered them.

"And there's something else," said Cas, and looked upwards.

He followed her gaze. Stars twinkled low the sky. There was a discord in what he saw, only recognisable when he concentrated; it wasn't even midday yet. Only then did he realise he wasn't look at stars, but star ships. Cargo haulers, kilometres long, massive enough to be seen from the ground, hanging motionless in orbit.

"That's not right," he said again, then to Cas, "why aren't they docking?"

"I think they already have," she said. She waved to the warehouses fanning out behind them. "Their cargo has already been delivered and consumed.

He could only think of one thing it could mean. "There have been no arrivals," he said. Such a thought seemed unnatural. There were always arrivals and departures. Constant burn offs from the spaceport as the massive ships fought to lift themselves through Gaian 16's gravity, like rising suns every half hour. At night the light reached Cole's own apartment windows and was as part of the background of his routine as the ever present street noise.

Cas nodded. "That's my conclusion. And do you want to know what's really frightening?"

He didn't think he did. Over the past few years he'd settled unto a

comfortable if unpleasant life, a routine he had slowly watch come undone over the past day. His eyes were still on the far distant space port, great silvery arms and grey sheet towers reflected light back at him. But no activity. He felt Cas's eyes on him. She didn't wait for a response.

"The brass don't know why. They're trying to pretend they do, but why would they send me out here to find out where everything was if they already knew?"

She joined him looking out at the port, and then up to the ships hanging in the sky. "And have you noticed the ships here haven't left yet? They've been filled with produce but they're just hanging there, like they have no place to go."

"First our connection to the Sphere goes, and then ships stop arriving," he said. There was nothing he had ever heard about a planet being suddenly cut off. Surely if something had happened, even for short time, it would be all over the news?

"Seems too much of a coincidence to me," said Cas. "Which begs your question; why?"
Cole could not begin to imagine, but was suddenly overwhelmed with the sensation that he very much did not want to find out.

***

Containment Protocol - Incident Ref#: 0000037..Time Stamp - minus 00:56

"The irony that this is the first time I need the hospital has not escaped me," said Cole. He pushed a wet cloth to the tender welt on his forehead, compressing the swelling.

Not long after his return from the docks, the hospital was shut down. That was what they were told as all the staff were gathered in the loading bay, with the express instructions not to use the term 'abandoned' when they spoke about it. The regular influx of injuries and accidents had piled up in the theatres and waiting rooms until they spilled out across the entrance roads. A critical mass of pain and frustration sent those who could rioting through

the wards. What security staff there were were quickly overwhelmed, and with at least 13 dead among the staff and nothing to treat patients with anyway, evacuation was called.

Just a temporary measure. Those words hung in his ears as he and Jean walked away. The next morning he saw smoke curling through the hospital's upper windows, with no hint of a fire service to put them out.

It had surprised him general panic had not broken out. Word of the G-Net outage broke on the same day. Some low level tech from the entertainment networks sufficiently spooked or unable to keep their mouth shut. It did not take long for those in the shelf stacking or delivery professions to put two and two together. Cue panic buying, followed swiftly by looting until the Marines stepped in and requisitioned all the supplies to distribute themselves.

And that was when Cole had found himself in a crush for the only supply truck to enter his neighbourhood that day. When the back was opened and everyone could see how empty it was there was a push for the front. Fists were thrown, someone landed a punch on a Marine and they responded in kind with batons and stun guns, leaving once calm was restored and without supplying a single gram of food.

"Probably for the best," said jean. "You could have waited days for treatment and lost pay to boot." She leaned back on her elbows and looked up. It was either unhappy coincidence or cruel cosmic joke that saw the summer turning into a record breaker. Midday temperatures broke 45 every day that week, and the humidity never once dropped below 85. At night Cole slept sheetless and naked, stickily uncomfortable, and wishing every time he rose into a warm soup of consciousness that he could open his bedroom windows. The streets and his apartment still held the day's heat , so with nothing better to do they had retreated to his apartment roof for the sake of a few degrees. At night the Bubble's underside could to seen from the city's ambient glow, but up here, above the street lights, you could see through it to the stars.

Cole leant back too, resting his head on the warm concrete and took in the constellations. It still took his breath away. It must be

ingrained into the human mind, he thought, hard wired that no matter what happened during your lifetime, a human could rely on the sky being exactly the same on the night they died as the one under which they were born.

And then to be on a different planet, with different stars. Some found it unnerving, but not Cole. It thrilled him, made him feel significant in a way he lacked the ability to describe.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” said Jean.

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“Makes you wonder just why people are worrying so much. I mean, the connection with the Sphere’s down, but so what? There’s nothing we need that can’t be manufactured here.” She sighed and worked her shoulder blades into the ground getting comfortable. “I’m beginning to think being on our own would be the best thing that could happen to a planet. What could go wrong when there’s such a sight above us?”

He couldn’t agree more. Without the corporations to squeeze every gram of profit from them the people of Gaian could focus on themselves.

Something Jean said prompted a memory.

“You see that?” He drew a circle in the air, indicating an area of sky that would take in entire light years, but to them it showed as a patch of night fractionally paler than the rest.
“Yeah.”

“That was originally a white dwarf. It went supernova about seven thousand years ago with an explosion powerful enough to be seen on Earth during the day.” He saw Jean giving him a sidelong look. “It’s true. It was recording by three separate civilisations on ancient Earth. It vaporised every planet in its system, creating a dust cloud which would be called the Crab Nebula. I’ve seen pictures of how it used to look from Earth. It was stunning. But that was a long time ago and a long way away, and now,” he waved a hand, “just dust.”

“And?” Jean asked.

“Each of those civilisations claimed it marked something important, something major that would affect them, bring death and destruction, the end of humanity, the usual. At the time they had no concept of the vastness of space, but they were certain it was not good news.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “And why are you bringing this up now?”

“Because of what you said, that how could anything truly bad happen when there’s such beauty in the galaxy.” He pointed to the patch of night. “Three separate civilisations were adamant *that* heralded the end of humanity. And here we are living on its doorstep.”

He went quiet. After a moment he became aware Jean and was looking at him. “Has anyone ever told you you’re a regular ball of fun?”

“What’s he talking about this time?” Cas pulled herself up the access ladder with on hand, the other held a cloth bag.

“Something about exploding stars and the end of the world,” said Jean. She made room for Cas between them.

“The nebula? He’s told me that one too. Exploding star, end of humanity, yada yada. And he calls me the paranoid one.” She reached into the bag and pulled out three bottles, giving one each to Jean and Cole. They were different shapes and showed the gum lines where labels had been scraped from the sides.

Cole held his up to the light. “Is this…?”

“Cheers.” Cas popped the top from hers and took a swig. “Sorry it’s not cold, but there’s only so much a girl can do.”

“Beer? Where’d you get it?” Jean took a sip of her own.

Cas held a finger to her lips. “Perk of the job.”

Cole laughed and toasted Cas. Jean joined in and they all leant back an enjoyed the view.

***

The stock shows the onplanet syndicates held on file had long since been exhausted, and with nothing on the channels people had taken to the streets looking for entertainment, or just some relief from the unrelenting heat. Cole and Jean joined them, walking with no aim in mind.

Their route took them by a packed Landing Square. The central point around which Gaian Prime was planned, Landing Square was an open plaza, dotted with strips of lawn and edged on three sides with open cafes and bars, and on the fourth with a manicured rise up to the Governor's mansion. In a city where every square metre was accounted for, it was the focal point for any public gathering or festival. Cole had never seen it so filled. He could almost imagine it was a public holiday were it not for the dry fountains and the heavy weapon emplacements gathered at the foot of the hill. He thought he saw Cas at one, but it was too hard to guess under the androgynous helmets.

"It's odd," said Jean.

"What?"

"Do you feel it? The calm? It's almost, I don't know, happy. Maybe not happy, maybe content."

He did feel it. The past week had seen public disturbances, but no riots, and once you got within the city blocks there was a feeling of community absent before. Without the exhaustive work and constant TV to occupy what few spare hours they had, Gaian Prime's citizens were forced into mingling, and it turned out they liked it.

A movement caught his attention. People walked quickly into one of the open sided bars, followed by more. A crowd was gathering around the TV in one corner. He pointed. "Maybe the G-Net's back up."

“Maybe,” she said slowly. They walked towards it.

The crowd around the TV was five deep, all turned towards the screen.

What they watched was not from the G-Net. An on-the-spot news report, identifiable from the syndicate ticker trailing the bottom of the screen. Cole knew it was local because of the heavy green vegetation in the background and the identifiably reinforced prefab buildings to the fore. He even somewhat recognised the perky young reporter.

That was where the familiarity ended. The reporter sported a heavily padded flak jacket and a Marine helmet minus the visor. What should have been presenter-quality makeup was smudged by soot scratches and the mascara on one eye leaked over her cheek. She ducked repeatedly as she spoke, holding an index and middle finger to her right ear while the camera shook violently. Around her, the scenery flashed in orange blooms or in faltering white flashes played out in silence.

“Volume!” someone in the crowd shouted. A remote was found and the bar filled a bass fuzz of TV speakers struggling to relay the chaos of noises. On screen the reporter kept talking, unheard as something flashed and trailed a light to one side, she turned to follow it, apparently unaware its scream drowned her out completely.

Cole turned to a man beside him. “What’s going on?”

“Dunno. One of the outer townships, one of the new ones to the east.” He shrugged without taking his eyes from the screen.

The reporter pointed to something and the camera panned, following her finger. It showed what looked like a battle ground. What was just recognisable as a township street. Pre-assembled concrete walls with municipal buildings emerged from thick smoke, hiding the road fifty metres down. Marines took up covering positions at wall corners or behind upturned cars. They fired blindly into the fog while squads ran forward, keeping low, to slide

behind other cover. The chatter of machine gun fire and the distant rumble of explosions, their base report a giveaway to their power, provided a perfect soundtrack to the visuals.

“Food riots,” said someone else. She turned to Cole. “Has to be food riots. If it’s bad here imagine what the provincials are going through.”

The screen blossomed bright orange with a large blast, momentarily lighting every upturned face in the bar.

“They have explosives out there?” he said

“Who knows what the hillbillies keep. They’re paranoid about the forest up there. And they’re so remote. It must be like cabin fever for a whole town.”

Cole looked back to the screen. While it was noon in Prime the soldiers sprinting across the street cast long shadows under a reddening sky. It must be very far to the east, deep in the continent’s interior.

The camera panned back to the reporter as the background noise lowered to a distant rumble, allowing through a snatch of words.

“-to keep back – deemed a safe distance. No word has been heard of the population for three days. It is believed they’re all in the hills behind the town – commander has assured us peace will be – to justice in Gaian Prime-“

The small arms fire struck up again, enveloping the other words. At spots around the street fire teams poured rounds into the smoke as two assault teams ran in under the cover to disappear into the fog.

As soon as the last soldier slipped from view the shooters stopped, careful not to hit their own men.

After the gunfire it seemed quiet on screen. Even the reporter stopped talking and turned to look. The quiet allowed everyone in the bar to hear the scream. It came undoubtedly from the far end of the street and rose from nothing to lung tearing volume in a

second.

Cole thought perhaps a Marine had been hit by the covering fire, but there was something in the tone which said no, no there was something else other than pain in that cry.

A shape coalesced then formed in the smoke. It sailed through the air to land with a wet crunch in the empty street. The camera shifted, searched for focus and came to rest on the body of a Marine.

What happened next came too quickly to follow cohesively. The smoke lit from within with a sudden storm of automatic fire. Shouts accompanied between the shots, cried for confirmation, orders. And them more screams.

Two other shapes could be seen moving about in the smoke, just beyond what would be easily discerned. Whatever the first was, it was huge. It lumbered in a way suggesting size, weight, and was unmistakably in dimensions if not size, humanoid.

The other shape emerged flying like the Marine before, only much larger. A car, bent and almost unrecognisable but for the tyres and broken windows. It came from the smoke like a ridiculously oversized and misshapen football, hit the street dead middle, throwing up sparks and stone chips where the bodywork struck concrete, and bounced directly at the camera.

The reporter, turned, ducked, began the root of a scream as the camera shifted as if dropped.

And the screen went blank. Static hissed. Almost immediately dreadball filled the TV, players darting, looking for an opening, and two commentators spewing out statistics like savants.

***

“What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t. Maybe like they said, food riots.”

“Rioters don’t throw cars, Cole.”

“You think I don’t know that!” He shouted, not meaning to. After the bar they’d both felt the unspoken need to find somewhere they felt safer, so they went to his apartment. From the way everyone meandered as they had that morning he guessed the news report was not general knowledge. More than a few heads turned at his voice. “I don’t know,” he said more quietly.

He opened to door to the stairwell and they walked up in silence. He didn’t want to talk. Talking would mean thinking, and he did not want to consider what the news report images could mean. Suddenly the feeling of disconnection did not feel so warm. The future was still full of potential, although not in the way it had that morning.

He was only partly surprised to find Cas inside his apartment, sat in one of the easy chairs, beside two full kitbags. She got up when they entered.

“I wondered if you were going to arrive. I was just about to leave.”

Cole filled in the blanks but Jean said, “Leave where?”

“The east. There’s been reports of food riots in the interior townships and we’re being called in for crowd control.”

It was the way she said it. Cole had known Cas for long enough to understand the flat delivery. “That’s not it though, is it?”

“You’re learning,” she said with the half slant of a smile. “No, I don’t believe it. Riot control is one thing, but a whole detachment is being mobilised, and we’re going armed for war. We don’t need gunships for crowd control. There’s something else too.” She let the sentence trail off.

“I’m not in the mood, Cas.”

“Easy, partner. I didn’t want to say anything before, I know what you think about my theories, and I if I told you straight I don’t think you would have believed me.”

“I don’t believe half the things you say.”

She smiled. “I know, but with you going on about the nebula and Gaian being in the blast radius I assumed you think I was trying to play with you.”

“I do not *go on* about the nebula.”

“You do,” said Jean.

Cole pressed his fingertips to his temple. “Just tell me, Cas.”

She shrugged. “I heard they’re not farming up there. They’re digging.” She let the inference hang a moment before, “Some kind of alien tech or artefact. But the thing is, it didn’t come from this planet. They found it buried under the ground mulch, as if it fell from space. The fall trajectory was back-calculated to the nebula.”

He looked at her and saw no guile on her face. “Where did you hear this?”

Another shrug. “I know people ,people who think like me, and we talk. Either way, there’s too much of a coincidence for the site, these *riots* and us heading out to be coincidence.” She stopped short. Jean didn’t notice it, but Cole did.

“You think the G-Net has something to do with it.” It was not a question.

“Like I said, too much of a coincidence. But right now there’s nothing we can do about it.” She hauled one of the bags onto the table, unzipped it and reached inside. “I don’t know what’s going on, Cole. Maybe I’ll it will become a bit more clear when I get there, but until then,” she pulled out the same heavy pistol she’d worn the week before. “I think you better have this.”

Instinctively he stepped back and put his hands up. “What? No. I don’t know how to use one of those. I think you’re overreacting.”

“I don’t,” said Jean, and took the pistol. She sighted down it and

checked the action just like he'd seen in every bad action film but with some competence. "Ammo?"

Cas pulled out a holster and a box of bullets, and handed them over with a wink. "Look after him while I'm gone."

***

They were back on the roof. It had become ritualistic over the last week for he, Jean and Cas to retreat up there after sunset. It was almost inertia which took him and Jean back up after the sun went down.

They sat quietly. They felt simultaneously diminished and concerned. Cole could not help but remember replaying the news report in his head, over-remembering the soldier's body as it flew through the air. With each replaying the limbs would fly more slackly, emphasising the lack of life

By now word of the news report would have spread. It was perhaps just one channel and just one showing, but with 20 million people in Prime enough would have seen it that rumour would spread, filling the void left by 24 hour online entertainment like fire, gaining momentum and exaggeration with each iteration. Cole found himself wondering how people could believe and even pass on such inflammatory rumour when he caught himself playing the news report through his mind again, but instead of a faceless Marine thrown dead against some far off road, it was Cas.

"She'll be alright." Jean looked at him and smiled.

He shook his head. "Reading my mind?"

"It wasn't too hard."

"You too?"

She nodded but didn't say anything.

He looked out and realised they'd faced themselves east. From here Prime slipped steadily down to an immense flood plain of tangled

grass and bog root. Far below them, just outside the Bubble, the lights of Pentridge Prison burned bright. Perhaps the one place in Prime where the electricity was not rationed.

“I just,” he began, and stopped.

“What?”

“I just… On one hand, maybe the rational part of me is thinking that perhaps this is all coincidence. I mean the G-Net is just machinery. Things break. And we’re living through things breaking, and it’s uncomfortable and things are changing. It’s understandable people would go a little crazy. But another part of me is thinking; maybe I’m in denial? Maybe the signs are right in front of me and I’m refusing to accept them because I wouldn’t want to deal with the consequences if I was right.” He laughed weakly. “Maybe I’ve been around Cas too long.”

Jean didn’t say anything and he carried on, “You read much of ancient history? The second world war?”

“Was that the on in Africa?”

“No, Europa. One of the biggest countries invaded another one. They won everything, rolled back the troops right up to the coast and damn near pushed them into the sea. And these troops, as they pulled back, limping and bloodied, past entire towns of people still going about their day like it was any other. Farmers tilling fields, going around unexploded bombs, clerks selling shoes, ignoring the line of maimed soldiers trudging by. There could have been no other way to see it than their way of lives were about to be erased, or at best changed forever, but they did everything they could to pretend otherwise.” He shook his head. “I honestly don’t know if I’m the equivalent of that shopkeeper.”

“Like you said, that was ancient history. We’re different now, Cole. Advanced, educated. We may be at the far end of an empire, but we’re part of that empire, the biggest one the galaxy’s seen with the might and technology to back that up.”

He gave her a sidelong look. “Are you trying to comfort me?”

“A little,” she laughed. “Want to try a little test?”

“Sure.”

She held out her hand. He raised an eyebrow but took it. “We’re going to close our eyes,” she said, “count to three and if everything’s the same we’ll take it as a sign we’ll be fine. Okay?”

He smiled. “Okay.”

He closed his eyes and Jean counted. “One. Two . Three. And, open.”

For a moment he though he hadn’t opened his eyes. And then he realised the Bubble had gone out.

***

Food and water rationing, close to martial law and a heat wave bordering on intolerable drove Prime’s citizens to their limit. The indigenous spores flooding the city’s streets pushed them over it.

It did not matter that it was the next logical step in energy conservation. The people saw the barracks, Governor’s mansion and Pentridge prison still bathed with electric light, and they broke.

Without the nullifying toxins and charge running through the Bubble’s canvass, the dense spores from Gaian’s mega trees broke the membrane, pushed by urgent inshore winds. The streets filled with pollen and microorganisms. Within hours the eyes and noses of almost every person streamed and wore red with abrasive reactions.

Cole and Jean heard the first riots that morning. The pop and crack of crowd controlling stun guns soon gave way the arrhythmic chatter of automatic rifle fire, and the screams of trapped crowds. By late morning the same series of sounds could be heard from another part of the city. By the day’s end the streets had been driven clean by soldiers and invasive spores.

***

Cole ducked as he ran, lowering himself to keep his profile below the upturned stall. He came to a breathless halt just before crashing into it, bringing himself up short and holding one hand out against the metal frame, as if that alone would have been enough to stop the collision.

He took a moment to catch his breath then risked a swift look around the edge. The Marines still lounged behind the sand bags of their emplacement, not looking in any particular direction. Cole allowed himself to breath and then checked the package in his other arm. It was squashed a little, but still intact. The vacuum packing had held against the beating his headlong run had given it.

Another look around the stall showed the Marines as they had been before. The whole of Landing Square looked like the scene of a recent battle, albeit a heavily one sided one. Word was the worst of the riots had been here at the foot of the Governor's mansion, and the military had not hesitated. He could see no bodies, but scorch marks and bullet holes riddled the cream paving stones, and brown stains showed where no one had bothered to wash away the blood.

All-out marshal law had been declared after the Bubble had gone out, with all citizenry ordered to remain indoors at all times, and that supplies would be delivered directly. When none came after the first 24 hours, Cole and Jean began taking turns to scavenge what felt like a deserted city. Empty but for the Marine emplacements at major junctions and squares. From the muted sound of gunfire from deep within the city Cole had guessed he was not the only one risking the curfew.

He froze. A pollen mote the size of his fist wafted over the stall on an unfelt breeze. It slowed, lowered before his face and hung there. He tried to will it to float on, but didn't dare to try and blow it away.

It hung motionless for second, then bobbed and began to float backwards, out into the square. He relaxed just as it lost height and fell to the flagstones, popping open silently and dispersing its seed in the thousands.

He breathed in before he could stop, and sneezed without control.

There was a shout from where the Marines were. Without thinking he was at a sprint, diagonally away from the upturned stall to the nearest side street from the square. Behind him someone shouted to halt and the stall erupted, shredded with high velocity repeater rounds. Cole felt the ground beneath his feet shake and he could imagine the tracer rounds following him, eating up the stones just behind his feet. With a final effort he shot into the alley, eyes streaming, and raced for home.

***

He reached his apartment keeping to back alleys and precincts. At one point a military truck eclipsed the end of one alley. He hid until it and the accompanying soldiers moved on, squashing himself behind a dumpster and furiously pressing a hand over his nose and mouth.

The entrance to his building had been half-heartedly barricaded with old furniture and packing crates. He pushed through and up the stairs, never once seeing another soul. He walked quietly, not wanting to alert anyone in the apartments to his presence. He had risked his life for the food he carried and did not want to lose it to some mugging so close to home. At his apartment he knocked a five beat pattern to let Jean know it was him, and unlocked the door.

The first sign he had that something was wrong was the way Jean sat in the chair; hands on its arms and straight backed. The second was the gun barrel pressed against the back of his skull.

There was a moment of dumb questioning, then he realised that whoever held the gun would have been in the bathroom, and he cursed himself for being so stupid.

Jean began to stand up and his eyes went wide, but dare not shake his head. He'd just give them the damned food and hopefully they'd leave. What did she think she was doing?

“You still have some learning to do, partner,” said a familiar voice from behind.

He blinked, too shocked and too filled with residual fear to turn. The barrel was removed and Cas stepped in front of him. He began to smile, then stopped when he took her in completely. She still wore her marine battle armour, but scorched and torn, and what looked like a sleeve from some khaki fatigues was wrapped tightly around the left side of her head, a deep crimson dot where the eye would have been.

She saw him react, managed her old smile through a wall of exhaustion and said, “It’s happening.”

***

Containment Protocol - Incident Ref#: 0000037…..Time Stamp – plus 683:19
//Evol. Phase ‘3’//Alert Status ‘Amber’//

The transport flew over the settlement, fixed-wing turbines sucking in and crushing ash-blackened air audibly above the motor whine.

The township was called Fourthree, a colloquialism born of a grid designation. It huddled between the outstretched arms of a mountain range deep within Gaian 16’s hemisphere-breaking continent, where three tectonic plates met and thrust skywards. It galled the parent corporation to find the Gaian soil, mineral rich enough to breed plants with a native aggression capable of cracking bunkers, was almost impossible to extract.

Still, that did not stop them trying.

Fourthree was a legacy of such exploration. Although what the prospectors found was not ore, nor was it of Gaian.

That was as far as Cas’s knowledge went. Whatever it was was deemed important enough to hide. The township was built to cover the excavation. Just another vegetation farm on a planet bulging with them.

Cas leaned from the bay and had trouble seeing Fourthree. Smoke hid most, surging from broken buildings like it wanted to escape. The rest of the township was there. Just not in once piece. It was as if the buildings had been splashed across the landscape. What fraction of wall or furniture would belong to another was like some apocalyptic child's puzzle.

She caught herself searching, but didn't know what for until she realised there was something missing, something so obvious as to be overlooked as absurdly impossible, if only in the unique ecology of Gaian 16.

There was no growth where the township had been.

She blinked, part surprise, part smoke. Where the forest met the town, where violence had obviously visited, the vegetation stopped. The ever insistent green gave way to parched red earth. It had been more than a day since they had the order to move out. Without the burnback crews to control the flora the entire area should look like virgin jungle by now, as if nothing had ever been here, instead….

Just what had happened here.

The smoke parted long enough for her to see the main street.

"Lieutenant!" The officer looked up from the comms station and came over. "There's movement down there." She had to shout above the engines and pointed to emphasise. He looked and saw what she did. Figures robbed of detail by distance, but clearly moving between and over the wreckage below. There was something in their movements she did not like, but kept that thought to herself.

The Lieutenant said nothing, just looking, ducking and weaving his head between the updrafts of sooty turbulence.

"We going to engage, sir?"

He didn't answer straight away, moved his attention to the horizon, then, "No. It'll be dark soon. Orders are to meet up with Captain

Mackalster and coordinate an assault in the morning." He slapped Cas on her shoulder. "Good eyes, marine. And don't worry, there'll be there tomorrow."

He went back to the comm station and she looked back down, taking in how human the shapes looked at that distance and how they clambered over the destruction in an almost insectile way.

***

Fourthree was lost. Had been lost well before any defence force could be mustered. Although to whom the details were vague. The word passing mouth to mouth hinted at a mania brought on from whatever they were digging up in the mountains. Perhaps some kind of hallucinogenic gas. Whatever it was, the operational objective had shifted from one of protection to that of containment.

Captain Mackalster's force had set up camp fifty kilometres to the town's west. The vegetation had been irradiated back to the soil and the perimeter secured.

The plan was to assault the town in the morning light, coming from the east with the sun at their backs. There would be three waves; the first from the air with concussion bombs and heavy repeater cannons, then the ground assault would sweep into Fourthree from the south and north, mopping up any survivors. All in all Mackalster had just under a thousand marines. The rest of the townships would see what happened to rebellion on Gaian.

The attack came at 12:58 local.

***

It was the bark of gunfire which woke Cas rather than the alarm. She at bolt upright on her roll, from sleep to fully alert in an instant. And then she realised there was only gunfire, no alarm.

It was still dark, but a cloudless sky and clear constellations threw enough light to give everything a silver outline, the rest of the details was filled in in clipped bursts of yellow in visual accompaniment to the unseen gunfire.

Around her the squad belatedly awoke, rolling, cursing, fumbling with dangerously sleep dulled fingers for rifles.

“All right, ladies, let’s go!” Their Lieutenant came striding between their squad, securing his chest armour. His soft core-world’s accent unsuited to gruff sergeant rhetoric.

She felt for her rifle and helmet, thanking her forethought of sleeping in her armour. “What’s going on, sir?”

“The autosentries on the outer perimeter picked up movement.” There came another burr of high calibre automatic fire from somewhere in the forest. “That’s them now.”

“We under attack, Lieutenant?” asked one man, strapping on his helmet.

“This is not a drill if that’s what you’re asking, soldier. We’re marines. We’re ready for anything. Ooh rah?”

“Ooh rah!” they chanted without thinking.

“You’re damn right,” said the Lieutenant. “With me.”

He lead them to a row of cargo containers, brought in by the military lifters and containing light ground assault vehicles. Around them the camp was already awake and alert. Marines ran to pre-designated spots in their squads, taking up defensive positions, wiping the remaining sleep from their eyes when they got there. The skyline to the east lit up briefly as the turrets let fly with another burst of controlled fire.

The Lieutenant told them to stay put while he went to look for Captain Mackalster and more orders. The moment he was gone half the squad leant against the container and slid down to the ground.

“Fracking drills.”

One reached under his helmet and pulled out a pack cigarettes, offering one to his neighbour. “The LT loves ‘em, eh?”

“How’d you know it’s a drill?” said another.

“Of course it’s a drill,” said a third. “You think the townies are here?”

“Ain’t no one out here but us and them,” said the first doubtfully.

“It’s not a drill,” said Cas quietly. She was at the container’s corner, perhaps the only one of her squad in position, watching the Lieutenant jog low towards the perimeter. Something about the situation made her itch.

“Yeah, no one but us and them, but how do you think they’d get here? Fifty kays through the jungle, at night, with no vehicles. Did you see any roads out of that town? Everything comes in by air. And you think it’s them.” He laughed and took a drag. The cigarette’s end flared as he sucked, illuminating his face in time with another burst of fire.

Which did not stop.

The pitch of the shots changed and tracer fire carved a line through the night sky, bright enough to temporarily blind Cas’s night vision. The firing stopped, and the forest was quiet with only the lonely shouts of sergeants to unsuccessfully fill the soundless void.

“What the hell was that?” said the smoker. He jumped up and looked over the container.

“Something knocked one of the sentries over,” said Cas. She was staring back towards the perimeter, blinking, trying to get her vision back. She could just see soldiers moving around the camp’s edge.

“What the hell did that?” This time no one answered. The sentry guns were designed for Gaian’s unique ecology, pinioned into the soil, and while it was not unheard of for the ultra-growth vegetation to knock one over, here and now there were other possibilities which pressed insistently on her imagination.

“This isn’t a drill,” she whispered again.

A pallet of crates fountained into the air at the perimeter, exactly as if blown up without an explosion. There was an exclamation of surprise, another of something else. Further along the line the night lit up with rifle fire, calls were made for order, quiet and confirmation. At another point a scream cut off mid breath. Nearby someone shouted, “Pascoe? That you, Pascoe?” The answer was less of a scream than a squeal, filled with things being pulled and torn. And then a roar of something big and throaty.

“What the frack?!” said a marine next to Cas. He rested his rifle on the container and aimed. She grabbed the stock and pulled it upwards.

“Don’t shoot!”

His eyes were white in the semi dark. “You crazy?”

“Those are our men.” The perimeter lit up with crosshatched tracer fire and muzzle flashes. It was a chaos of movement and silhouettes she did not recognise. “We need orders,” she said, noting and trying to control the rising tone of her voice. She pressed the commpad on her helmet, “Lieutenant, you there?”

The radio buzzed and cracked into life. The Lieutenant’s voice could be heard between the gunfire ghosting over the radio and across the camp. “-ere. Sta-.”

“Lieutenant, what’s the situation?”

“-ack! Get bac-etreat. I repeat, ret-” His voice stopped there, but not the transmission. That continued, carrying the sound of gunfire fractionally off time to what she heard naturally, and the obstructive sound of thick bubbling.

She looked at her squad, and they looked right back. They had all heard.

The rifle had taken on a different rhythm. No longer short and directed, but longer, uncontrolled rails of magazine-emptying

barrages.

She became aware the others were looking to her as the longest serving soldier. “What d’we do, Cas?” said one.

She didn’t know. Training told her to stay put until orders came, so she began to reach for the commpad again when a shadow detached itself of the disorder at the forest’s edge and came running towards them. It was a headlong rush, not a thought out retreat. Whoever it was was coming too fast for her to call arms. Instead she sighted down her rifle to give the soldier cover on her own.

She cursed the man’s stupidity, he was coming straight at her, denying her any line of sight behind.

What that could mean occurred to her too late, and the figure reached the container, leapt atop it and launched itself at her.

It happened too quickly. She had a glimpse of bare flesh and outstretched fingers, curved inward and glossy in the starlight.

On reflex she fired. The rifle shook with a three round burst and the figure’s leap terminated mid-flight like it struck a wall. It fell wetly to the earth behind the crates.

“What the fr-” The squad jumped to their feet, rising their own delayed guns uselessly.

She kept sight down her rifle and tried to control her breathing. She tried not to think she saw what she just saw, forced her training to the fore and deal with the immediate situation and not think ahead.

The smoker jumped on the crates and trained his rifle down to where the figure fell. When he got there the cigarette fell free from his open lips. “It’s still fracking moving!”

Her radio cracked again. She hadn’t realised it was still on until a sound insisted itself into her ear. A mewling, weak and pitiful and calling her attention back to the perimeter. The frenzy of movement still took place in silhouette, but more localised and less

shooting.

And she knew then to be afraid.

***

“What was it?” said Cole. Cas’s story, from arrival over Fourthree to the rush across their temporary base and the acquisition of a transport to fly what was left of her squad back to Prime, had taken three hours. She skipped details on the wound across her face, but Cole was left with the impression of defending the transport’s boarding ramp as it lifting from the ground, and a taloned hand raking from hairline to cheekbone. He did not want to ask about her eye.

“I don’t know. It was… human.” She struggled for the word. Not in finding it, he thought, but the admittance the she might be right.

“How do you know?” said Jean

Cas shrugged, an echo of her perpetually cheerful self showing for a moment. “Two legs, two arms. Well, mostly two arms. Some were wearing the farmer overalls. Some even had their names still on the chests.” She laughed. Not in a happy way, in a way that said either she would laugh or she would cry, and there was no damn way it would be the latter. “But,” she stopped, took two tries to carry on, “But they... their skin was different. Like it wasn’t a part of them anymore, like it was just there to stretch over what was beneath, you know?”

He didn’t know, and the image it conjured in his mind assured he would never want to.

“Where’s the rest of your squad?” said Jean.

“Back to their homes. Families. None of us felt like reporting back for duty, and we saw no other transports lift off after us. As far as command know here we all died out there.” She laughed. It was a hollow, breaking sound in the silent apartment. “Nearly a thousand marines all up. The better part of the Prime garrison. I honestly thought we’d find nothing out there, that it was an exercise to keep

the forces out in the field, you know? Having an army sat around doing nothing is one thing, having them with nothing to do when they think there'll be no recourse from Central is another. I thought they were just giving the commanders something to think about other than how they could be running Gaian better than the Governor."

Cas stopped and looked into space. After a moment she began rocking slightly. "A thousand marines and most of our air support. They couldn't have seen where we landed, but they came through the dark without light, over fifty clicks in four hours through actively hostile jungle and they overran us in minutes."

She looked at them, her eye empty of emotion Cole would hope to find there. "How do you stop something like that?"

A loud buzz of static and half a squawked word made him and Jean jump. Cas looked numbly down at the bag beside her chair and pulled out a radio. Cole saw how the kit bag, the same one she left with, was misshaped by hard angular bulges. She shook the radio, twisted the control twice, then a third time harder. It kept cutting on and off, and she slammed it on the table in disgust to crackle with half bursts of static.

"But, you can't just give up like that," said Jean. "That's what the marines are for, right? To defend the people. Right?" There was clear panic in her voice. He felt it himself. Not long ago, before the planet had been cut off, word of an enemy force on any Sphere planet would not have worried him. He would have either trusted in the powers that were to deal with it, or plain not believed his safe little existence could be threatened. But that morning alone he had fought another man for a packet of scrounged food and been shot at by soldiers which should have protected him. News of some apocalyptic force in the wilds of Gaian did not only sound plausible, but almost inevitable.

Cas also heard the concern in Jean's voice. Cole saw her expression change from one of defeat to a hopeful half smile. "The rest are still here. There'll be ready." She reached out and squeezed Jean's hand, smiling reassuringly.

Cole wondered if Jean saw through that as easily as he did. His mind was busy with remember maps of Gaian, the outlay of townships running north and south from Prime, making use of the ocean for transport, and the longer trail of settlements snaking east into the continent, leading all the back to Prime.

There were 300 million people on Gaian 16. The majority in the farming settlements which were the planet's reason for being. If this were some kind of mania, the bread crumb trail of townships would lead them straight to Prime. And what if this were some kind of infection? What was the incubation period? How quickly did it spread? Take effect?

An image rose unbidden in his mind, of a wave urge on by tidal pressure, picking up momentum as it gathering water beneath it. Swelling. Growing to crash up the cliff face that was Prime with monumental force.

The radio crackled again, insistently announcing stilted words. "Wait," he said. "Did it just say something about the TV?"

They all looked at the radio, dinted where it had taken a hard fall, the antenna melted to a stump, but tenaciously relaying what transmissions it could. "----*uni*----*uni*---*vision trans*---."

It was enough and Cole scrambled to find the remote, gave up and switched the screen on at the wall. It lit up to the serious face of a woman in a flat grey naval jacket in front of an outsized flag of the Sphere.

It cut in mid-sentence, as if they had interrupted a video call as she spoke directly to them. "-ergency. The Sphere of Planets have been scrambled to the defence of Gaian 16 and all its inhabitants. All defence personnel in Gaian Prime are ordered to gather in Landing Square at 19 hundred hours local to receive reinforcements. The protection of Sphere citizens and local assets are our primary concern, so we ask all citizens to remain in their homes during the term of the emergency. Thank you in advance for your cooperation. The following is a repeat of this message. Citizens of Gaiain 16, I am Commander Emille Leon of the Sphere f Planets Stellar Navy. We are here…"

The recording replayed. Cole switched channels a few times. It played concurrently on each.

Hope flared on Jean's face. She turned to Cas and squeezed her hand back, the relief washed away the weeks of stress and worry in an instant. And why shouldn't she? The cavalry were here, with supplies and god-knew how many soldiers.

Then why did he not feel the same way?

Cas looked accusingly at the screen as if she could find a new piece of information in the perpetually looped recording.

He caught the look she gave him and he checked his tablet.

"Still no connection to the G-Net."

"So? The marines are here." Said Jean. There were tears in her eyes. "It's all over."

Cas looked at her watch. "Nearly four." She stood, picking up the bag."

"What? Wait, you're not actually going?" Cole stepped between her and the door, belatedly realising if she wanted he would hardly be an obstacle.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Of course she doesn't," said Jean. "If she doesn't go she'll be called a deserter when they put the defence force back together. She'll get sent to a penal colony or get world-clearing duty!"

He looked back down at his tablet. Shook it, as if he could make it connect. "I don't like it. There's just something...wrong about it."

Cas half smiled. "You're learning, partner."

He didn't feel like smiling, but then an idea occurred to him.

***

They were above one of the cafes around Landing Square. Cole's explorations the past weeks had given him a good sense of Prime's backstreets, and the restaurant-rich area around the Governor's hill was his choice spot.

The room they were in was once a high-rent apartment, priced accordingly to its view and location. Now it had been ransacked to the bare walls, enterprising citizens stripping everything for what they thought would be a more comfortable future for them. At least now they had a full set of empty rooms to move around in, squatting down to keep below the windowsills, only peeking over them to catch a glimpse.

Outside the Square filled quickly. Marines from barracks across the city gathered densely enough to create an almost slate grey sea. Among them mingled men and women in civilian clothes with rags across their mouths against the spores and rifles slung over their shoulders. Either off duty soldiers reporting in, or the few survivors from Fourthree finding a new surge of confidence in Prime's chances. The groups flowed and mingled with an atmosphere that was almost celebratory. Cole heard unrestrained laughter for the first time in weeks.

And why wouldn't there be? The responsibility had been taken from them. Backup was here to shoulder the pressure while they would ride on the adoration of Gaian's citizens. Not a man or woman there would have to a buy a drink for themselves in their lives.

But among the newfound camaraderie, behind the backslapping and smiles, something was missing.

"Management." Cas almost spat the word. She looked the barest sliver above the window, only her forehead and fingertips showing. She dropped down and looked at Cole. "You see any higher-ups out there?"

He didn't. The gathering ended at the foot of the hill to the Governor's mansion, where he would assume anyone in authority

would be. Somewhere elevated, where they could see and be seen.

“Where are they?” whispered Jean. She looked a little too high and Cas pulled her back down.

“My guess?” she said, “Still in the mansion. That’s the most defensible position in the city. Full line of sight, nice thick walls. Rumours are it has enough bunkers below to survive artillery barrages. I think they know something we don’t. Or suspect.”

“Suspect what?”

She shrugged. “Maybe the same we do. Just *something*.” She looked again. “Looks like that could be everyone. Everyone left, anyway.”

They looked pretty formidable to Cole. He had never seen so many military personnel in one place before, and they were all armed. And so what if he couldn’t see any officials? Wouldn’t they be in the mansion, coordinating with the navy? “I don’t know, Cas. Maybe we were wrong.”

She had not stopped looking, assessing, searching for clues of what may happen. She didn’t answer.

“Cas? I said maybe we were wrong.”

“You think?” She looked at him with unaccustomed doubt. This was just too unprecedented, too big. Nothing in her training or creed prepared her for this, and she just wasn’t sure. He understood, but caught himself doubting his own words. Maybe he was just being hopeful like Jean, that this was it, and it would all be back to normal soon.

“Sure,” he lied.

She looked between him and the crowd, bit her lower lip and exhaled slowly. “Okay then. Let’s go.”
They stood. A roasting wind blew through the open windows, hot enough to sting his eyeballs. The clouds over the Bubble rushed away in each direction and the air lightened, giving everything a

white halo.

“What-?” He began.

“Down!”

Cas threw an arm around his and Jean’s chest and launched herself forward, throwing them to the floor.

Before his head struck the floor and his vision filled with numbly falling stars, he saw the sky above Governor’s rupture. Immediately after, quickly enough the two events could be inseparable, the mansion shattered. Cracks appeared all over its body, filled with light, and expanded outwards, tearing the building’s fabric before engulfing it in a ball of expanding destruction.

The window blinds were thrown inwards by a searing wave of air. If there had been any glass they would have been shredded.

He opened his eyes. His ears whined, every noise sounding tiny and faraway. The skin on his face felt scoured.

Cas and Jean looked out of it. Blinking, trying to make things come into focus. He pushed himself up. Outside the sky burned an angry red. Dusk had come early and suddenly as dirt filled the air.

If he had been thinking clearly he would not have stood and looked through the window. But sound was still beyond his recovering ears. Robbed of audible accompaniment nothing seemed real.

The scene in Landing Square could have been comical. As a whole the soldiers had fallen away from the hill, all lined in the same direction like some human game of dominos. It could have been comical, were the Governor’s hill not missing.

Its base was still there, but where there was a hill was now a crater. Rocks and a few lonely foundations glowed along their edges. Cole caught himself thinking that Cas was right, now he could see behind the hill would have really had an uninterrupted view of the city, and wondered vaguely if he had concussion.

On the square some of the soldiers were rousing themselves, groggily pushing up on their elbows. Without sound the scene had a dreamlike quality which continued even after the first landing pod slammed into the Square's edge. The impact's violence had to be relayed visually. The concrete pavement shattered under its tungsten shielding, the sudden dust cloud thrown up from the ground and flying concrete chips. The pod opened like a time-lapsed flower, tear shaped slabs of soot-streaked metal as its petals.

The armoured figures emerged before the ramps touched the shattered concrete, hitting the ground and giving the area the briefest of scans before dispersing the closest cover, making room for more behind.
Cole didn't recognise them. Fully armoured in interlocking pale grey plates, not an centimetre of skin bare. Rifles of barely human proportions nestled easily in their arms.

The first figure ran by a recumbent marine pushing himself onto his elbows, blinking in the dirty air with obviously no idea what was happening. The armoured figure aimed and fired a burst through the marine. The shots took him in the chest and punched him into the ground. The body was still twitching as the figure ran on.

An abrupt flash at the pod's other side caught his eye, and by the time he found its source another recovering marine lay in an emerging red pool.

The first noise in minutes entered his conscious as another pod impacted on the Square's other side with a muted crash of cracking concrete, and another in the Square's centre where dozens of marines lay just a second before. He looked up to the sky where contrails gave away the arrival of even more pods.

He turned, stumbled. Cas and Jean were just getting up, their faces still overwhelmed by sensory overload. On unsteady feet he did his best to haul them up. Tried speaking their names, unsure at how to pitch his voice when it sounded distant in his own ears.

His first thought was to get them away from here. The pods fell like rain, indiscriminate on where they landed.

His second was prompted by the sound intruding on his ears. The tinny whine of before was replaced by the steady chatter of gunfire, uniform and unanswered as the Square was swept clean of marines.

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Containment Protocol - Incident Ref#: 0000037…..Time Stamp – plus 688:47
//Evol. Phase '3'//Alert Status 'Red'//

Behind them, over the building and in Landing Square, the gunfire continued. It did not come from the same weapons Cole had heard the marines use on the newscast, but from something with a deeper, surer report, and they were unanswered as they swept the Square.

He could only think of one reason for what that could mean. 'Why' was a different question, and one which could wait. Right now he had Jean's arm over his shoulders and his free hand pulled a half-catatonic Cas away from the building they had hidden in. He did not know where he was trying to escape to. He had no destination in mind other than *away*.

The apartment's fire door escaped into an alley. Cole gave a silent thanks to any god listening the alley was empty of everything but the second hand sound of rifle fire. They limped on, gaining speed with each step as their senses returned. Cole thought, *at this rate-*

There was a brief dropping tone in the air, and the end of the alley disappeared in a cloud of dust and flying concrete chips. The ground shook with a localised tremor, and a pulse in the air knocked them from their feet to land painfully on elbows and backs.

Cole recovered first, rocked into a sitting position, and was the first to see the figure emerging from the cloud. It was armoured like the troopers in the Square, coming from the smoke as if it could see perfectly. It stalked, holding the massive rifle ahead of it, beneath its feet chunks of shattered bricks crunched flat.

Cole felt his heart stop, and realised too late they had dropped Cas's guns in the apartment. Two more troopers emerged from the smoke, coming down the alley towards them. He wished very

much he could apologise to Cas and Jean, but it was too late, and he could only watch as their death came down the alley.

The first trooper reached where they lay, turned its rifle on them. Cole swallowed. The barrel shifted, jumping from one spot on their bodies to another as if it were searching them. And then the trooper was gone, moving on, its rifle making the same movements across the walls and debris as it had on them. The other figures passed without a glance down, moving off and around the corner, leaving them alone with the smell of dusty air and dwindling gunfire from the Square.

He became aware he was breathing in racking half sobs, then realised it wasn't him. Jean lay beside him, tears streaking her dusty cheeks as she sucked in air as if she were hyperventilating. He grabbed her shoulder and when she continued to stare forward, shook hard. She blinked, looked at him. He mouthed *OK?*, frightened of calling the trooper's attention back to them. She nodded. At his other side Cas moan and rolled onto her back and coughed a dry hack. She opened her eyes, blinked, and raised a shaking had to point to the sky.

He looked up to see more contrails burning through the sky to land all over Prime.

***

"Where are we going?" Jean's voice shook. She wasn't panicking, not quite, but the tremor in her voice suggesting panic was a future possibility.

When Jean and Cas had come to in the alley he'd told them all of what happened. It had hurt him to see the hope in Jean's face die, but there was no way around it. They moved under his direction, following him as he had moved about Prime for weeks, sticking to cover and alleys. Every so often gunfire would erupt a street or two away, always the needling whine of marine small arms fire, and the heavier reply of the armoured troopers. The exchanges never lasted long, and always ended with just the deeper shots sounding.

They reached the end of another alley. It opened onto what was

once a wide boulevard, now chicaned by concrete bollards and torn up by recent gunfire.

“The docks,” he said, peering up and down the street.

Cole realised now he’d been subconsciously heading for his apartment and the one piece of security he felt on the planet. The sight of so many drop pods falling across the city robbed him of any sense of safety.

The only option he could think of now was to run, as quickly and far as possible.

The street was empty and waved them to follow.

“Why?”

“We need to get offplanet. Whatever those troopers are I don’t think they’re here for our safety. Between them and whatever’s coming through the jungle, I’d rather not be around when they meet.”

“But where could we go? The G-Net’s down, there’s no navigation we-“

The day’s shocks, the weeks of hunger and pressure broke and he turned on Jean. “God damn it, do you think I don’t know that? What do you want, to stay here so those troopers can shoot us, wait for those things to get here, or go hide in the jungle and let the plants strangle us in our sleep? Let’s just get off of here and then worry about what’s next.”

He stopped, breathing hard while the echoes of his last shout reverberated off the empty buildings. Jean’s eye’s filled with tears and her lips began to tremble. He felt bad. But however bad he felt, he felt even more tired and had no energy to apologise. He turned and walked on.

Jean turned to Cas who trudged behind. She hadn’t said anything since the Square. “Cas…”

“He’s right,” Cas said. “Let’s just… let’s just go.”

***

Knots of people gathered at street edges, darting across the open ground after many glances up and down streets before huddling for communal cover at the other side. When the groups saw Cole, Jean and Cas they would pause and look at the three of them warily. When they made no moves which could be aggressive these groups ran on, casting furtive looks over their shoulders as they moved off.

“Looks like we weren’t the only ones thinking of escape,” said Jean as the latest group ran on.

“Then we’ll have company on the ship. Let’s keep moving,” said Cole.

They reached the same fence Cas had cut a flap through on the day Cole came to see where the hospital supplies had gone. That day felt like years ago. Others had discovered the makeshift gateway and the chain link had been pulled back even further, the metal bent permanently for easier use.

They slipped through without a word and when they emerged onto the waterfront Cole felt his heart sink; all the ships he had seen at anchor those weeks ago had gone. The bay was empty. Even the ships docked at the wharfs had left.

Worse, any other water craft had also been taken. From super tankers to the smallest aluminium skiff, they had all gone.

His strength left him with all his hope and he dropped to the ground. Were he honest he expected it to be this way. They were too late, but there was always hope. He had always thought there would be hope.

Neither Jean nor Cas said anything. They just stood and looked out to sea, through the hole which was once the only opening in the Bubble and out across the open water to the spaceport. Its colossal docking towers caught the setting sun, throwing out flashes of pure light, like a beacon in the darkness.

No, he thought. *Not today*.

He stood and began walking.

“Where are you going?” said Cas.

“The spaceport,” he said. “There have got to be some cutting tools left around here somewhere. We’re going outside the Bubble to the coast and we’re going to make a raft. I’ll paddle there if I have to.”

“But that’s got to be ten kilometres,” said Jean.

“Do you see a better way?”

“No,” she said. “I suppose I don’t.”

He looked up and down the waterfront, looking for something which may look like a machine shed. “As long as we can get offplanet we’ll be in a better position. There’s hope. There’s always hope. Right Cas?”

He looked at Cas, as much for support for his own convictions than to convince Jean, but she wasn’t looking at him. Her face tilted upwards, to a point in the sky above the distant port. She whispered something and it took Cole a moment to realise what; “My god.”

He looked up.

In the darkening sky there was a glint in the air. What he once took as an early star he recognised as a superhauler, the massive cargo vessels used to ship vegetable matter from Gaian to other systems.

It was moving.

It felt wrong. An object so far away, so massive, should shift over imperceptible intervals. Like the moons, you knew they were moving, but they should remain still in the sky.

But the superhauler was moving.

It banked noticeably, swinging its lumbering prow away from anchor and Gaian, moving into a position where it could break the planet's gravity.

"It's moving too fast," said Cas.

Even with his weak grasp of physics Cole knew she was right. From Gaian Prime's waterfront it looked sedate, but if they shifted the thousands of kilometres to where the ship lay, the forces exerting themselves on the superstructure would be immense. He could imagine the pained squeal of twisting metal that would be filling the ship as they watched.

The turn put it side on to them, making it appear to be as long as Gaian's closest moon was wide. A trick of distance which somehow still allowed the larger aspects of the ship's body to show as grainy texture at the huge distance.

"It's making a break from orbit," said Cas without looking away.

"They're escaping," said Cole.

"They're full already?"

Cole shook his head to answer Jean. "I doubt it. They're getting themselves out of here." He didn't blame them as much as he cursed them. Whoever was piloting that ship would know they were leaving everyone on the surface to die.

He jumped in the air, swung a fist at the unimaginably distant ship and screamed and spat. "You bastards! You goddamn fracking bastards, get back here you selfish sons of bitches!"

The ship exploded. Its mid section flashed twice in quick succession like two short lived suns, strangely merry in their lack of sound.

Cole dropped to the floor and stared, thinking dumbly for a moment he was responsible for the detonation.

He watched the hauler began to drift apart in two even pieces. A

series of smaller explosions rippled along the tear's ragged edges, making their way further along the body until petering out as the ship fell silently apart.

"What just happened?" said Jean

Cole didn't answer. Couldn't answer. He could only imagine how many people were aboard that ship. Even a minimum compliment of crew would be measured in the hundreds. They would still be on board now, perhaps frantically running for the escape pods, struggling against the immutable gravity as the hauler fell against Gaian's pull. It was destruction and loss of life on such a huge and impersonal scale he could only view it dispassionately.

"They were shot down," said Cas. "Someone didn't want them leaving.

"Who? Those soldiers?"

"My guess, yeah."

The ship's two halves continued to separate, their angle noticeably taking on a downward arc as, without engines to stabilise its orbit, it succumbed to the planet's gravity. They were falling towards the western horizon, clearly gaining speed as they fell.

"We'd better go," said Cas. "It's getting dark. We should find somewhere to take shelter."

***

They moved back into the city. Cas wanted to get away from the docks. She said the ship would crash into the ocean spanning over half of Gaian's surface, and although the bay Prime used as a dock was protected by a series of islands between it and the open ocean, she wanted to be on higher ground just in case the ship's crash caused a tidal wave.

That was why they nearly walked into a checkpoint of the armoured troopers.

Fighting off an exhausted sleep Cole made a cursory look around an alley corner and nearly walked out before a movement told him to get back. He made a second, more careful look.

The street lighting had long since gone out, but it was a clear night and Gaian's moons cast enough light that he could see movement down the street.

"What is it?" asked Cas.

He waved his hand down in a frantic *keep quiet* motion and she joined him at the corner. He heard her breath stop as she saw what he did. Three hundred metres away the troopers had positioned themselves between the concrete bollards set up by the marines as checkpoints. They squatted behind the barriers, scanning the street with their massive rifles. As he watched one of the troopers moved from behind a barrier and kicked over a concrete planter holding an ornamental tree. The planter was big, and filled with heavy Gaian soil, but it he kicked over as if it weighed nothing. The trooper moved back and retook its position.

"Clever," whispered Cas.

"Huh?"

"The way they're moving. See?"

Another one of the troopers moved to another piece of cover across the street. When it was in place another shifted to take a spot near its previous position. The way they moved looked wrong to Cole; too light in spite of their armour. A cold thought rose, and he wondered if he could outrun one if it came to it.

"They're constantly moving, always keep all sectors covered and denying any snipers or ambushers the chance to lock down their positions." She sounded close to admiration.

"Well whatever they're doing let them do it the hell away from us."

They moved back along the alley and emerged onto the street around the corner. The moment they were in the open Cole heard

the low rumble of a big engine being gunned nearby.

“Frack, back!” He pulled Jean’s arm back towards the alley, but Cas shook of his hand.

“I know that sound,” she said, and stepped further into the road.

“Cas, no!”

She looked up to where the noise approached from. The engine revved and the street was flooded with halogen light. But Cas didn’t move, just started waving her arms and shouting, “Hey! Hey, stop!”

“Cas!” Jean pulled from Cole’s arms and ran into the street before he could stop her. He cursed, found himself running after them both, reaching Jean as she reached Cas and a truck screeched to a stop in front of them all, bathing them in blinding light.

An amplified cut over the motor’s growl, “Halt! Identify yourselves.”

Cas raised her hands, showing they were empty, and shouted, “Catherine Alverez, Private, Second Platoon Gaian 8th.”

There was no immediate answer. Words could be heard under the motor’s idle rumble but not discerned. The lights rocked as weight moved around the truck, and somewhere a door opened and boots hit the ground. A figure marched into the light, a man in light marine fatigues. His eyes were hunted by shadows, and his clothes looked slept in. As if to spite that he walked with a stiff-backed pride.

He marched to them and stopped, crossing his arms at his back. “Captain Ferenz, 5th. Why aren’t you in uniform, marine?”

Cas stood to attention and saluted. “Caught off duty, sir. Sir, Landing Square…”

“We know. I don’t know who those armoured bastards are, but they hit every barracks in the city simultaneously. We’re gathering

forces now for a counter attack."

"You're going that way?" said Cole, pointing down the street.

"That's correct."

"Sir," said Cas, "There's a squad of those soldiers down there, dug in behind the barriers. It looks like they're expecting trouble."

"I see." Ferenz chewed , looked over their shoulders with narrowed eyes, then, "Numbers? How were they armed?"

"Six, sir. Looked like small arms only, we didn't see anything heavy."

"Good. Well, we have to go that way. Now's as good a time as any to make a stand. You armed, marine?"

"No, sir."

"Shame. We have nothing spare. Get yourself to East Gate barracks and report in. We have contact!" The last was to the truck. Voices began shouting and before he knew it Cole was passed by a rush of marines in mismatched fatigues heading to the street corner. The Captain was with them, directing teams to different points and assigning roles. Cole counted two dozen marines as they took up position.

"Come on!" Jean was grabbing at his hand. "Let's get out of here, let's go!" She made a grab for Cas too, but she just walked off after the marines. "Cas, come on!"

She didn't answer, just looked on after the marines.

At an unheard order the assault was launched. Gunfire erupted, filling the street and making him cover his ears and involuntarily duck.

Grenades were thrown, some to explode unseen down the street, some fell without noise to emit clouds of smoke.

Shouted orders sent men running out of sight under the fusillade, before the rest of the marines followed with only their second hand noise to tell him what happened. He thought perhaps Jean was right and they should go, but Cas was walking towards the corner, keeping low, but moving quickly.

“Cas!” He shouted but could barely hear his own voice over the chaos

She ignored or couldn’t hear him. When she reached the corner she looked around, only exposing herself as much as she needed to see.

The fire fight’s noise took on a different pitch. The furious automatic fire from the marines was joined by the deeper, more purposeful bark of the other soldiers. With worryingly swiftness the newer noise drowned out the greater weight of marine arms until it was all that was left. And then, not even that.

Cas flipped around to lay against the wall and slid down to the ground, staring forward the whole way.

Cole was running before the slide finished. When he reached her she didn’t react to his arrival, just continued to stair forward, breathing quick and shallow. He looked over her body and shoulders, only realising when he didn’t see any red stains he had been holding his breath. “Cas?”

She looked up as if she just realised he was there, and grasped his shoulders quickly enough to startle him. “We have to go! We have to go now!” And she was off, dragging him by the hand when he didn’t keep up, and taking Jean’s as they passed.

Cole realised Cas was speaking. The words were hissed below her breathing, repeated in a chanted loop, and he stopped listening when he realised what she was saying. “It’s like they weren’t there. They went through them like they weren’t fracking there…”

***

Cole couldn’t think straight. Exhaustion saturated every fibre of his body until his mind could only concentrate on putting one foot in

front of the other.

It was hours since the ambush, the darkest part of night. Prime was silent, the unearthly quiet fractured irregularly by sudden fire fights somewhere off in the streets. The exchanges never last long, and Cole had long since stopped taking notice.

If anything Cas was in a worse state. She stumbled after him in a half catatonic stupor, barely cognisant of her surroundings, content to let Cole take the lead. Only Jean was forward thinking enough to say, “We can’t go on like this. We need to find somewhere to sleep.”

An hour ago the idea of laying down and closing his eyes with those soldiers in the city would have terrified Cole. But now he was just too tired to care. Probably, he thought slowly, a good sign Jean was right. They were trudging by a municipal office building, its corner opened to the street by some explosion, a rubble pile leading up to the hole.

Cole managed to shift direction and began walking up. Behind he could hear Jean talking softly to Cas, leading her after him. Inside the air was dryer, cooler, and Cole’s eyes began to close by themselves as he let sleep claim him.

“Boy did you ever choose the wrong building.”

His eyes snapped open, and he wondered at how tired he must be to have missed the two people standing in the room. No, he corrected himself. Not two; three. With the third lying on the floor by the lip of the open wall. Cole had walked right by him to get inside. Behind he heard Jean gasp. He was glad when Cas made no movement when he saw the two figures were carrying more weapons then he had ever seen on a single person.

They each carried rifles. Old, but well cared for, and each limb seemed to have either a knife or pistol strapped to it. The figure on the ground was similarly equipped, but armed with a long-barrelled rifle. Cole blinked as he looked. If that was a man his face was covered in what looked like fur, with more hair escaping where one item of clothing met another.

“You said they were walking on, Yndrel,” said one of the men.

“Thought they were, boss,” said the figure on the floor. His speech had an odd lilt Cole had never heard before, stressing the higher pitched letters.

“Well it’s too late now, they’ve seen us. Kill them.”

Cole thought he had misheard. He was so shocked he could only stand with his mouth open.

‘”What? No.” That was the second man, further back in the room. He knelt and picked up a barrel-heavy rifle, slinging it over his shoulder as he stood. “Orders were recon, not shooting innocents.”

“’S’right boss. You’re the boss, but you’re not the boss boss,” said the figure on the floor with its odd inflections.

“So what, we’re going to take them with us?” said the first.

“Up to you, but I’m not shooting them.”

“Just wait a minute,” Cole heard someone say, and was only partly surprised to find it was him. He raised his hands palm out as he spoke. “We haven’t seen anything, we’re no trouble. We’ll just keep on walking eh?”

“Too late for that,” said the first man. “You’ve seen Yndrel here.”

Cole wondered what he meant when the figure on the floor stood on recurve legs, knees facing the wrong way. What he took for a flat nose was more a snout.

Cole stopped speaking, all fear gone at the surprise of seeing an alien for the first time. It stared back, and blinked in an oddly mammalian way.

“Aw shit, we don’t have time for this,” said the first man, throwing his arms up. “Bendramin.”

A shadow detached itself from the wall, in the half light the effect was as if the wall came toward Cole. He focused in time to see a figure, much too huge to be a man, coming toward him. He had time to register hairless skin with an orange hue before a fist the size of a football swung at him and everything went black.

***

There were noises. Voices, the thuds of something heavy and packed tight being dropped onto a concrete floor. The air was as dry as it ever got on Gaian, but cool and still, with only the movement associated with the noises to disturb the air. Cole thought on this and decided to keep his eyes closed. Let them think he was still unconscious. His mouth was dry and throat felt distended, but he forced those feelings away until he could learn more.

Whoever was in the room with him they spoke Sphere, but with a multitude of dialects, most so thick they could be other languages. Individual words were hard to discern. Then a squeal, high pitched and worryingly familiar. He did hear words then; “Stop it, you’re killing me!” Cas’s voice.

He threw of his pretence at sleep and jumped up. He shouted, “Get off of her!” as loud as his parched throat would allow.

His eyes were filmy and watered as the light stung them. He blinked furiously, making the room swim into focus to show a low-ceiling cellar, packed floor wall to wall with boxes and an upturned steel drum in the centre, acting a table for six people sat around it, playing cards and drinking from canteens. One of the people was Cas. She held a set of cards in her hands and stared at him with her one eye.

Cole hadn’t known what to expect. A torture rack and a brazier suggested itself in his mind, but not this. In the absence of any obvious torture his prepared attacked faltered, and he stood there breathing hard and wondering what to do next.

Cas began to snort. Her mouth twisted as she tried to hold in what Cole knew was coming. The absurdity of the situation overcame

him and when Cas burst out laughing he could not help but join in.

***

“You just needed to sleep. That’s why I didn’t wake you.”

Cas and Cole were in another room of the cellar, sat against the wall drinking what he was assured was coffee. He recognised none of the people playing cards with Cas, but she held a rapport with them that suggested to him if she didn’t know them personally then it was at least spiritually. They had all gone, leaving him and Cas to talk.

“Who are they?” he asked.

“Freedom fighters. They don’t agree to Corporation rules, and because of that they’re outcasts.”

“What do you mean *don’t agree*? There is no outside of Corporation rules.”

“There is. I’ve heard rumour, but it’s hard to learn anything when all you’re fed is through the G-Net. Especially in an out of way place like Gaian.”

“But how do they live? No one would trade with them.”

She shrugged. “Stealing, but they do trade. Not everyone likes the Sphere, Cole. You’re one of them.” She sipped her coffee while looking at him. She had lost the rag tied over her face, placing it with purpose made eye patch. He was glad the rest of her face looked unhurt.

“Yeah, but... piracy?”

“We also protect people. People like you.”

A man walked into the room. He was dressed like the other men Cole had seen, but unarmed, and wearing a long brown coat which dusted the floor as he walked. He extended a hand to Cole. “Josep Cabal. I suppose you called me general of our little band. At ease,

Private." He said to Cas as she stood and saluted.

Cole was surprised to find how easy it was to shake the man's hand. Cabal had the relaxed smile that was easy to trust.

"The Lieutenant here said you may have some misgivings about us."

Cole did not know what to say, so went with the first words to come into his head. "You're all traitors."

Cas kicked him hard on the ankle, but Cabal smiled. "Some would say, but we're not the ones leaving you here to die."

"What do you mean? Do you know what's going on here?"

"Oh yes." Cabal pulled over a box and sat down. "The parent corporation on Gaian discovered something here. Something Central is very keen it should have."

"What kind of thing."

"No one knows. The reports we intercept tend to be garbled and contradictory. Sometimes non-native ore, sometimes something obviously unnatural, such as carved stone or machinery. But in each case the effects are the same."

"What happened out at Fourthree," breathed Cole.

"Precisely. Governor McMahon was too greedy for his own good. Protocols said he should have sealed off Fourthree and called for Central aid when he found what he found. Instead he thought he'd see what he had first. See if he could make some profit for himself before anyone else had to be involved."

"So this has all happened before?"

Cabal nodded.

"Then why haven't we heard about it? News of a planet-wide infection would be all over the G-…"

Cabal smiled as Cole's words shrank, patted Cole on the shoulder and stood. "I don't want this to sound offhand, but your government has left you here to die. All trace of Gaian 16 will quietly disappear from Sphere records and anyone who cared to ask after anyone who lived here will have their silence bought or assured by other means. To all intents and purposes from a month ago you never existed, Mister Cole."

Cole looked at Cas, who tried to look reassuring, failed, and made do with a shrug.

Cole turned back to Cabal. "Then why are you bothering telling me this? Why are we even here at all?"

"The Private here swore loyalty to our cause, in exchange for us taking you and your friend offplanet. We're always in need of experienced soldiers. As to your second question, there are two reasons. The first is supplies. Mundane, but there you go. The second is to learn."

"Hold on," said Cole, pressing his fingertips to his temples. "Cas works for you now?" Cabal nodded, and Cole looked at Cas who mouthed *you're welcome*. "Okay, she and I will talk about that later, and what is it you're going to learn? Why haven't we left already?"

"The term for the position Gaian 16 finds itself in right now is *deadzone*, Mister Cole. Nothing comes in, nothing gets out. So far Sphere Central has contained such deadzones by firepower and the luck of population. To this point, the highest population to be placed in a deadzone is twenty thousand. At the last consensus Gaian 16 had a population of three hundred million. I would say there is something to learn here, wouldn't you?"

***

Containment Protocol - Incident Ref#: 0000037…..Time Stamp – plus 739:02
//Evol. Phase '4'//Alert Status 'CRITCAL – CRITICAL – CRITICAL'//

It had been one day. Or perhaps two. Without seeing the distant red blur of the Gaian star passing across the sky the hours bled into

each other for Cole. He was leaning towards two days, although he would not be surprised if it had been more.

Since he had woken, and Cas and Cabal had given their revelations, he had thrown himself into helping the rebels. It was that or think about what he'd been told.

That he no longer existed.

That his own culture didn't want him.

The injustice made him seethe so much his hands shook. So he put his mind to any task asked of him.

He fetched, carried, sorted, catalogued, packed and carried some more. He'd remained in the network of cellars and sub-rooms he had woken up in, which seemed to be several basements knocked into one sprawling tunnel system. When he asked any of the rebels where he was they would give a grid designation which meant nothing to him. He was somewhere within Gaian Prime, that was apparently all he needed to know.

The act of asking was not easy. There were too many of the rebels to count, and they were in constant motion. Arriving from patrols out into the city, bringing back scavenged supplies or intel. But they were not all human. If he had to guess, Cole would say most weren't.

On his first day he watched a group of three in one corner. Individually they were the size of a small human, but were simian in their look and build, with downy fur and short snouts. They chittered in some high pitched language until one noticed Cole staring. It nodded to him and flicked two fingers from its forehead in a greeting so human Cole found himself returning it.

Another alien he had already met but not realised had sought him out shortly after his conversation with Cas and Cabal. Cole had felt the floor rock under his feet and turned to find what he first thought to be the largest man he had ever seen. That was before he took in the pallid yellow skin and the stubbed tusks pushing through its jaw. It had extended an open hand and Cole felt the

urge to run, until the creature introduced itself as Bendramin in a shockingly mild voice, and apologised for hitting him the night before.

Cole had been so surprised he thought nothing of the creature pulling up crate and sitting to talk with him, asking about his life in Prime and what the planet was like. It was not until Bendramin apologised and said he had duties, hefting a cannon as tall as Cole onto his shoulder, that Cole was overcome with the absurdity he had spent twenty minutes complaining about bureaucracy with a creature of another species.

He had also found Jean in one of the rooms, staring into space and drinking the foul liquid the rebels insisted on calling coffee.

“Hey.” She continued to starer forward until he sat directly opposite. “Hey,” he said again, forcing a tired smile.

She nodded then shifted her eyes to the canteen in her hands.

He moved his head around, trying to catch her eye without success. “You, er, you want to give me a hand with these?” He patted the stack of boxes he just placed on the ground.

She shook her head without looking.

Cole let the silence drag for a minute before asking, “Are you okay?”

When she answered her voice sounded empty. “Were you told about the deadzone?”

“Yeah. Every conspiracy theorist’s wet dream, eh?”

She looked up, giving him the full glare from her red rimmed eyes. “And you find that funny?”

“Of course I don’t,” he said, modulating his tone.

“I had family, Cole. Me, my sister and mum. I’m the youngest. My sister stayed home to look after mum, letting me go to school. *I*

was the earner. *I* was the one who was supposed to pay the bills. Why do you think I came to a shithole like this?! I came for the money, because I was supposed to support three. And now what? Central didn't just kill me when they cut us off. They killed my whole family."

"Hey, you're not dead." He reached across the table but she pulled her hand back.

"As good as. Even if I get back to Sphere space I can't work. My SC number will have been erased with the rest of me. And mum, and Diana…" she choked back a sob. "They won't stay quiet, they'll want to know what happened to me. They'll make a fuss and won't take no for an answer, and…" she put a hand across her mouth, as if keeping the words inside could avoid the inevitable.

In the future, when Cole would be asked why he did what he did, where he found his strength, he would think back to this moment. When he felt something inside harden, and he decided the voiceless should be heard.

***

Over the days he learnt there were teams of rebels slipping throughout the city, spreading like a net, bringing back anything which a resistance movement could use, from food to clothing to the marine weapon caches the armoured troopers had strangely left alone.

"They know the weapons are there, they just know soon no one will be around to use them," said Bendramin when Cole asked. The big alien had stopped by to continue his conversation, but Cole had some questions of his own.

"And who are they?"

"The Enforcers? They're bad news is what they are, my friend."

"Are they human?"

Bendramin shrugged. An expressive gesture with shoulder so big.

“Perhaps. I’ve never seen one up close. I don’t know anyone who has and has been in any state to talk about it. Let me give you some advice; if you see them, run, and keep running. That’s the only sure defense we have against them.”

On what could have been the third day there were less rebels coming back, and those that did were empty-handed more than not, and now before they left they would shake their comrade’s hands and wish them luck. A few even clapped Cole on the shoulder on their way out. On top of that, there was a change in their air; an expectation, like the pressure drop before a storm. It set the hairs on Cole’s neck on end.

With no more packing to do he set about looking for Bendramin to ask what was going on when he walked into Cas. He almost apologised at first, not recognising the weapon-clad woman he nearly bumped into. Then he saw the eye patch. On his second look he saw a woman in combat fatigues that could have been tailored for her, armed with pistols and knives and a smile that said the wearer was as comfortable and in control now as she had ever been in her life.

It was pleasing to see his friend was obviously happy, and it must have showed on his face as Cas slapped him on the arm hard enough to bruise.

“Been busy, I hear,” she said.

“Likewise by the looks of it.” He rubbed his arm. “Where have you been?”

“Getting up to speed. Cole, there’s so much out there! So much more than reality vids and dreadball and Central!”

“I know,” he said. A guilty thought of Jean made him wonder how much of a good thing that was. He changed the topic before Cas could carry on. “Is something happening?”

Her expression turned serious. “Yes. And I think you would want to see this, come with me.”

She lead him off, through rooms left bare of boxes and sleeping pallets, passing only a few soldiers who nodded to them as they passed, smirking when Cas responded with an automatic salute. She led him through a hole knocked through to another basement, and from there through a heavy metal door showing signs of recent spot welding. The other side was bare concrete steps, bending back on themselves, climbing up a building Cole had no idea was right above his head the whole time. At the landings the windows had been blacked out with cardboard taped across the sills, allowing through a square halo of angry red light. The fire exit doors had been welded shut and reinforced by piled stone blocks until Cole wondered if a truck would have been able to come through.

He lost count of floors around eighteen. Eventually they reached the final landing with a single door across the steps. Cas rapped a three beat knock followed by another two. The door opened and bathed Cole in a light which stung his eyes after days spent underground.

He stepped out into the oppressive heat and humidity he found so familiar, knowing he must still be in Prime, but not recognising the city before him.

The domed framework which had held the Bubble was still there, but the charged membrane stretched between the struts had been punched through or had been carried off by the wind. Without that the Bubble was just a skeletal frame, the remains of some legendary colossus spread above the city. Birds flew through the metres-wide gaps and jungle creepers were already climbing the struts, dangling their vines down, reclaiming the land lost to the human invaders.

The city below fared no better. Some of the taller buildings appeared as if they had been felled, their towers ending too early in ragged stumps, or else were missing entirely. Others had walls blown out, leaving their insides open to the air and choking the streets below with broken masonry.

And now even here, in the centre of Prime, the ever present forest of Gaian insisted itself onto the landscape. Vines already wrapping lampposts and roots splitting foundations. Off in the city he heard the distant rumble of a building coming apart, the sound like an avalanche lost in a glacier field.

It could have been years. It had been days.

“Makes you think, doesn’t it? If something so big can be undone in so little time, what’s the point?” Cas was beside him, sharing his view and his thoughts.

“Ah, Private you’re back. Welcome topside Mister Cole. I’ve been told you made yourself indispensable, thank you.”

Cabal was at the roof’s edge along with a dozen other rebel soldiers. They hunkered down below the shallow safety wall, some peering over the top, looking through vision enhancers across the ruined city. Cabal crab-walked away from the edged, and stood to dust his knees before shaking Cole’s hand.

“It’s the least I could do. I mean, you’re getting us out of here.”

“We are, but the least you could have done was sit in a corner and shake with the revelation of learning everything you took for granted was a lie. That’s the most usual response, you’ve stood up quite well Mister Cole, you should be proud.”

“I did say,” said Cas.

Cole shot her a look, wondering if she would expand on the quizzical statement. Instead she kept her eyes from his and Cabal said, “Yes you did, and you were quite right,” and to Cole, “But to say thank you I thought perhaps I might give you a choice.”

Cole frowned. “A choice?”

Cabal nodded. “We’re leaving, Mister Cole. I do believe we have everything this city has left we can use. The majority of our forces are already in orbit.”

“But *you’re* not,” said Cole, wondering where this was going. “Why is that?”

“A direct man. I like that. I told you when we first met there was something we could learn on this world, and we shall stay down

here until we do. Come with me."

He moved back to the roof's edge, squatting lower as he went until his profile was fully below the wall. Cole followed as best he could.

Cabal turned to his soldiers. "How are they doing, Yndrel?"

The rebel that answered was looking over the wall using image magnifiers, only exposing what it needed to. "They're still gathering, boss." It pulled back and handed the magnifiers to Cabal. Only then did Cole realise it was one of the furred aliens, and that he'd heard the name before on the night he stumbled across the rebels. The alien offered him a nod before crouching and crawling cat-like further along the wall.

Cabal looked through the glasses and then handed them to Cole. "Have a look down there Mister Cole, tell me what you see."

Cole raised himself and looked through the glasses. The view expunged the red glare from Gaian, mellowing the image with a green shade. It auto-focused on the view as he looked around, wondering what Cabal was talking about.

And then he saw it.

The viewfinder rested on the heads of dozens of people. He fumbled with the focus, zooming out until the number became hundreds, and then thousands. It seemed many of Prime's remaining citizens had gathered together, pressed up against each other, and all facing in the same direction. He zoomed further out until he could see where they were.

Of course, he thought, *it would be Landing Square*. There was a sickening inevitability to it. Everything which seemed to have happened over the past weeks had begun in Landing Square and the Governor's Mansion.

At that thought he panned the view up to the hill where the mansion had stood. The hill was still half there, now a hollow caldera, and surrounded by a loose ring of armoured figures. Cole turned to Cabal, the question obvious on his face.

“Odd, isn’t it?” Cabal said.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“They Enforcers have allowed people out the buildings for hours now, but fired on anyone walking down the wrong street. Ever so slowly, perhaps enough so they haven’t realised it, the populace have been channelled into the square.”

Cole looked down on the milling sea of heads, wondering how many people he knew had survived this long were down there. “Why?”

“We have our suspicions, but won’t know until whatever it is happens.” He turned to one of the human rebels, “Are we ready?”

The soldier inspected his wrist-mounted computer and tapped a few buttons. “All feeds are clear and recording properly, sir.”

Cabal nodded. “So we wait. And this is where you make a decision Mister Cole. We have one more shuttle leaving here soon, after that we’re waiting here to see what Central has planned. You can go now, or wait and see.”

Cole turned to Cas, “You’re staying here I take it?” She nodded with a mischievous grin. Cole sighed. “Then I suppose I’m staying too.”

Cabal gripped him by the shoulder and smiled. “Good man! That’s what I like to hear, tenacity. Welcome aboard, Mister Cole.”

Cole smiled in returned, but wondered if he would come to wish he left on the shuttle.

***

The wait was interminable. As exposed as they were to the sun on the rooftop, Cabal would permit no shade to be put up, nothing that would make a profile against the skyline. Instead the soldiers were sent in teams into the stairwell to cool down and rest. Cole had

been tacitly slotted into the rebel's structure with Cas as his handler. He shared Cas's team's break from the unrelenting sun. He thought they were much too far apart, but he was apparently alone in that opinion as the soldiers shared jokes, a few ribbing him for his sweat-sheened face. All too soon he would be back outside, the heat pressing his damp clothes uncomfortably against his body, the back of his neck rubbed raw by his wet collar.

There were more people down in Landing Square now, even a cursory glance showed that, and more slowing coming in through the corridors allowed by the Enforcers.

"Why are they doing this?" he whispered to Cas.

"The Enforcers are gathering something from where the Governor's Mansion was. The bombardment was some kind of bunker cracker, designed to destroy fortifications but leave anything belowground more or less intact. Since then they've been hauling things out to carry away. I spoke to the other guys and they reckon it's something to do with what caused everything at Fourthree."

"But why the people?"

She shook her head. "I asked Cabal and he said he didn't know." She turned away from the sight and slid down behind the wall.

"You don't believe him?" Cole said, without really knowing where the question came from.

Cas thought before she answered. "I don't know. But what reason would he have to lie? This whole situation is..."

"Fubar?"

She grinned. "Yeah, fubar."

He hunkered down beside her, welcoming that the small mercy that he could still share a joke with his friend after the world had come down around them.

A noise intruded on the moment, a great bellow of sound which cut

through the silent city, echoing between Prime's buildings, seeking out all ears. It came strong enough that Cole could feel it all over his body, juddering through him like a ship hull grinding against rock.

The others could not fail to hear also. One soldier dozing against the wall shook awake, instantly alert. They all looked up and around at the other buildings, as if they could see the sound's source.

By degrees the echoes died away, each iteration weaker than the rest until the quiet returned.

Cole looked over the wall's edge, wondering but not believing the noise had come from the Square. He was not surprised to see nothing much had changed on the ground. The mass of people were still there, although now their heads bobbed about, belying the collective uncertainty they all felt.

The Enforcers also changed their behaviour. Those on the hill stop moving, looking off in the same direction, away from where Cole could see. At some unheard order they all began moving again with purpose. They quickly formed a human-chain into the hole at the bottom of the crater. Almost immediately they began passing up objects too small for Cole to see, up to a pile which was then transferred in a in a similar manner to shuttle nearby, it's hangar open to allow the troopers to enter.

"Boss?" Yndrel was looking down at the Enforcers through his view finder. Cabal came over, not bothering to crouch as he did, and took the finder, focusing them on the scene.

"As the old saying goes, *so it begins*." He gave the finder back to Yndrel. "Is everything ready?"

"You bet, boss. Checked it five minutes ago."

"Check it one last time if you wouldn't mind."

"You're the boss-boss, boss."

“What’s happening? What’s beginning?” said Cole.

“We’re about to find out, Mister Cole. This is what you chose to wait and see.”

There was another bellow. It was louder this time, allowing Cole to identify an animalistic nature. No machine could reproduce such a defiantly guttural roar. This noise came from a throat, and it was worryingly closer than the first.

That factor was not lost on the people in Landing Square. A few on the edge of the crowd began to shout. There were cries, a scream. Hands reached up from the mass, trying to claw through or over the people that were in their way.

There was a third bellow, closer again, easier to guess where it came from; away, just out of sight from the rebels on the roof, but obviously not from the people on the ground.

The dam broke. With a collective cry the crowd surged against itself, the edges furthest from the hill pushing against the main body. The result was a concertina of bodies as hundreds of people tried to push thousands.

The panicked cries easily reached the rooftop now, conveying the collective fear.

Staggered flashes of automatic gunfire erupted from along the first and second floors bordering the Square. Balconies which once held upmarket restaurants giving expensive views of the Square now offered uninterrupted lines of sight for the troopers stationed there.

Cole watched this, removed by hundreds of metres, and could not understand what he saw. The Enforcers were not targeting the crowd, but whatever they were firing on they took no care to find cover themselves. They stood in the open or climbed on tables, resting a foot on the balcony balustrade to get a better view of what they could see and Cole could not.

There was a break in the barrier holding the crowd at the Square’s eastern edge, and then people were streaming from it, escaping

from what came the other way. It was as if Cole was watching an egg timer on a massive scale, the sands of humanity poured through a tiny gap and ran among the ruins.

Cabal turned to Yndrel and calmly said, “How much do we have?”

“All cameras have enough for a full minute loop, boss,” the alien replied after checking his wrist computer.

“Good, good. We’ll try for another minute before evac. Let me know when that happens.”

Cole looked at Cabal. He could not comprehend the contrast between his composure and the scenes of chaos unfolding on the streets. “What’s happening, Cabal? What are you doing?”

“This is the latter stages of the plague your erstwhile governor unleashed on this world, Mister Cole. He killed himself and everyone here when he unearthed whatever he found in Fourthree, the same artefact I presume the Enforcers below are so keen on extracting from what remains of his mansion.”

“But the people, you have to help the people!”

Cabal shook his head. Cole thought he saw a flash of regret brought quickly under control. “They are already dead.”

Cole looked dumb struck between Cabal and Cas. His friend could not meet his gaze.

“You’re fracking kidding me, right?” he said to Cabal.

“We don’t have the space to take even a tiny fraction, Mister Cole, and even if we tried the Enforcers would sooner engage us than the monsters which are coming. And even if we did, there is not enough known about this plague yet. Anyone down there could be infected. I will not risk my people.”

Cole stared. An attempted response came out in an exasperated huff. Cabal broke eye contact and looked down on the street.

Cole shook his head. Disbelief and a sense of helplessness cursed through him until one of Cabal's words rose from his memory.

Monsters?

He looked back down. The scene was almost the same as before. Hundreds coursed through the break in the Square's barrier, but the sheer number of people meant the square was still as packed as before.

But there was new ingredient in the mix.

Figures, just specs at the distance, darker than the people and the pale armoured troopers, began to pepper the crowd from behind. The moved into view much too quickly than should be able, and slowed only when they reached the people fleeing.

He looked about him, searching for a view finder, seeing one in Cas's hand. He snatched it before she could stop him and turned the screen on the crowd. The view was shaky and turbulent while the finder sought a still object to focus on. Then all too quickly it did, and Cole almost choked on the gasp trying to escape his throat.

It showed him a scene from the worst horror vid, direct from the pages of the most debase religious texts from Old Earth. Only now the demons moved, swung, clawed and let forth with roars robbed of sound by distance.

The view finder came to rest on a frenzy of movement. A man fled, scrambling between overturned market stalls and park side benches, finding a path between the people around him. Just as he came to a stretch of open ground one of the monsters leapt through the air, clearing what must have been five metres to land heavily on his back, bringing him down like prey.

The force knocked the bandana tied across the man's face up over his eyes. He was blind as his head struck the floor. That was the detail which stayed with Cole. The man was blind, unable to see the monstrosity on him, yet still he tried to crawl away, mouth open in a silent scream as his hands tried to find purchase on the concrete. He still tried to escape as the claws swung down and

hacked into his back and ripped outwards, spraying blood and broken bones.

Cole was locked on the sight, shock or dumb fascination made him watch as the thing punched clawed fists into the man's back below the shoulder blades, and with a roar Cole could not hear, tore upwards, spreading the ribcage open giving the ma obscene wings of bone and blood. The thing leapt from its crouch, taking it from the viewfinder but leaving the leaking pulp of its prey behind.

Cole flicked the view around, searching for the monster. Instead he came to rest on one of the balconies above the square. The troopers there were still firing their oversized rifles, a discipline of short bursts at selected targets. Aim, fire, aim fire. Behind one came another trooper. This one carried a different weapon, a long tube hefted on one shoulder. It took up position behind its comrade and sighted down the street.

"Rocket launcher," Cole whispered.

Cas's head snapped around. "What?"

"Rocket launcher," he pointed, "Down there."

Cas's reaction was immediate. "Sir! We have rocket launchers! Possible Progenitor contact."

Cabal strode up behind Cole as the launcher fired, a brief burst of light and trail of smoke, disappearing out of sight among the streets. There was a dull concussion and a second hand flash as the rocket exploded, followed by a roar, the same deep bellow Cole heard earlier.

"Yndrel, how much do we have now?"

"About a minute and thirty seconds, boss."

"That'll have to do. Okay everyone, we're leaving. Leave everything none essential, calmly but quickly now."

"That's our cue, partner," said Cas as she shook Cole's shoulder.

He wasn't listening. Through the 'finder he was tracking the people as they ran screaming from the square. They flowed like water, hundreds heading toward the building he was on, and behind them came those things.

"Cole?"

Some ran with speed that was inhuman, chasing down men and women as they fled. Others leapt, jumping along the tops of abandoned trucks and low roofs, using walls as springboards to launch themselves on top of victims. Everywhere they landed there was blood, blood and a fury of teeth and claw.

"Cole, now!" Cas hauled him up by the shoulder and he allowed her to shove him at the door. Some of the other rebels were already running down the stairs, a few waited for he and Cas to pass, their agitation palpable for them to get down the stairs.

"Where are we going?"

"There's a flyer waiting for us at the waterfront," said Cabal from further down the stairs.

The memory of the things on the street rose unbidden in his mind. "We have to walk there?"

"That's the idea, Mister Cole. But in this particular case, I would highly suggest you run."

***

Containment Incident Ref#: RESTRICTED DATA…..Time Stamp: RESCTRICTED DATA
//Evol. Phase CLASSIFIED//Excise *All* Galactic Positional Data Repositories//
//Alert Status 'DEADZONE'//

They ran down the stairwell, taking three steps at a time, one hand anchored to the central handrail to spin them around the landings to take another flight. The concrete walls blurred by, but still it

seemed to Cole they took much longer to descend than the exhausting climb up. Noise from the street reached them, growing louder at each landing as they passed the blacked out windows, dopplering the noise in waves of volume. A repeating wash of screams, growing louder with each descended stair.

Cole tried to block that out, concentrating on the pounding of boots reverberating off the naked stone. The only one of them seeming to take the headlong rush in their stride was the alien Yndrel, who descended with catlike grace, sometimes running its feet along the walls when it took a corner too fast.

“There’s a tunnel, right?”huffed Cole between breaths. “You dug a tunnel to the docks.”

“Did you see any earthmoving equipment?” answered one of the troopers shortly.

They reached the bottom after what felt like an hour, and rushed through the heavy metal door leading to the cellar. A Rebel held the door open, making frantic waving motions for them to get through. Cole and Cas passed, followed by the two last troopers, and the door was slammed with solid finality, unseen bolts sliding home with a solid *clack*.

“This way!”

Cole didn’t see who spoke, but everyone ran in the same direction and he followed. They ran through the cellars he spent the last few days living in, all strangely silent and empty now, inhabited only by the sound of their boots and the odd abandoned bed roll.

And Jean.

Cole caught the barest glimpse of her seated at a table, uncaring at their passage.

He stopped, nearly causing Cas and the trooper behind her to collide.

“Cole…?” said Cas carefully, following his gaze.

“What the frack man, move!”

“Give us a second,” said Cas.

“We got-“

“I said a second!”

Cole ignored them, approaching Jean slowly, half crouched as if she were a frightened animal likely to bolt. It looked as if she hadn’t moved since he saw her last. Slumped over the table arms crossed, staring at its top.

“Hey,” he said as gently as his racing heart would allow.

She didn’t react.

He reached the table and squatted down until he would be in her field of view.

“Hey,” he said again.

She blinked, but didn’t look up.

“We have to go,” he said, trying to keep the rising panic from his voice.

She kept looking ahead. “Go then.” The breath barely left her lips.

“Jean,” he leant in and hardened his voice, “I’m serious. There’s something very bad coming this way.”

“I know.”

“Then come on!”

“I’m not going.”

His heart sunk. “Jean,” he said plaintively.

“I’ve got… I’ve got nothing, Cole. I don’t want to run to nowhere, and never have anywhere to return to. I’ll never see my sister, my mother… I don’t want to live through each day knowing that.”

“You’ve got me,” he said, knowing he had never said anything before with such conviction.

“I know. Thank you. But goodbye.”

“No, I’m not letting you do this.” He stood and put his hand under her arm. He would carry her to the shuttle if he had to. She spun on the seat and there was a pistol in one hand, its barrel pointed at his face.

The unexpected turn stunned him still.

“I’m not going, Cole. I don’t think I have the strength to do this until this last minute, but it’s all I have.”

His instinct was to look at the gun, but he could not take his eyes from her face. He had never seen anything so sad in his life.

“There’s only one bullet in this,” she said, “Please don’t make me use it on you.”

Finally he let go. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

“Yeah,” she said. “Me too.”

***

They caught Cabal and the others up quickly. They had not asked what kept them, and they in turn offered no reason. Instead they ran, exactly as if their lives depended upon it.

He had not given much thought to how far the cellars went, but they went from one knocked-through room to another without needing to slow. He wondered if perhaps it was a mental trick, his mind stretching out time and distance from something he knew he could not change, would forever wonder if perhaps he had just tried a little harder, said the right words.

It was as that thought completed that the leading trooper kicked a solid-looking door without slowing, and ran out into blinding sun light.

He ran out, his eyes watering as they adapted, bringing his vision down from pervading white to washed shades of yellow. They were out on the street. After what he'd seen from the roof the realisation made his skin erupt in gooseflesh.

The troopers wasted no time with shouted directions. They knew the way and ran in the surety Cole's sense would force him to follow.

He had no intention of being left behind.

The streets were as empty of people as the last weeks, but now with a background buzz, the distant crowd noise of collective fear.

If they were heading for the waterfront surely the tunnel had dropped them in that direction, then they should be ahead of the surge from Landing Square. So long as they ran they might keep ahead of the wave spreading outwards from the Square. The wave of people and…

He shook his head to stop the train of thought.

"This way!"

The lead trooper turned off the street and lead down an alley. The constricted path forced them into single file. They jumped refuse and fallen boxes. Yndrel leapt from overturned dumpster to another on all fours, its rifle strung across its back. It easily overtook everyone else, vaulting out at the alley's end and into the sunlight.

Where it looked up the street and froze.

They piled out after it, and Cole saw why it stopped. It seemed they had not kept ahead of the bow wave.

People streamed across the end of the street, following the main

thoroughfare in a blind effort to get away from Landing Square. A few stumbled into their street, the sheer volume of bodies ejecting them from the rush, but when they saw the rebels and the weapons they carried, they turned and forced their way back into the press to be swept out of sight.

“Well we’re not going that way,” said one trooper.

Cabal paced a few metres up the street, looking up at the buildings around them like a caged animal. “Symonds, find us an alternate route.”

“On it,” said one, looking down at his wrist computer.

“No need, this way,” said Cole. He broke for an alley further down the street.

“Cole?” said Cas.

“I know these streets. I’ve lived them for the past month. This way heads dockside, trust me.”

The troopers looked at Cabal for affirmation. He nodded, and they were following Cole within a heartbeat.

He led them between buildings, what looked like blind alleys through semi-hidden passages. They were at the very edge of Cole’s knowledge of Prime’s backstreets, but he had his bearings and the tang of salt in the air confirmed he was going in the right direction. All the while the rolling sound of the crowd stayed with them, rising and falling oddly, making it hard to pinpoint.

He barrelled from the alley into a street, and was knocked sideways.

He cried out in shocked fear without knowing what hit him. He fell heavily, scraping wrists against the pavement and saving his head from striking the ground. Before he could stand something pounded him hard in the back, forcing him down and driving the air from him. Then another blow like the first, then another.

“Get off him!”

A hand was under his arm, hauling him upright. He shook his head clear. He thought he must be concussed because the world ran passed him in a blur. Then he realised he was not concussed, because the world was moving. Moving, running, pushing, jostling and shouting.

They had emerged into the stream of humanity running from Landing Square.

“You okay?” Cabal had him by the shoulders, looking into his eyes while the troopers made a barrier against the tide. The people flowed around them like any other obstacle, the sight of Yndrel not even enough to catch their attention.

Cole went to respond, nearly choking when he tried to speak winded, and settled for a nod. A scream from the street’s end cut through the air. At first he thought someone else had fallen in the press. But there was more in that cry than unexpected pain. There was fear. Desperate, pleading white fear.

There was another identical scream, cut off mid-cry in a way that was more disturbing than the scream alone.

Cabal heard it too. He looked around searching for the source just as the press of people surged against the thin line of troopers. At first they bowed under the pressure, Cas tried to link arms with the trooper called Symonds, then they went over as the crowd rolled over them in a wave of screaming.

Behind them all, chasing at the crowd like wolf among sheep, something sickly red leapt and landed in the press, its impact heralded by another short-lived cry.

Cabal pulled Cole to one side, shouldering people from their way, pushing and tripping where the press became too much, until they were against a wall.

Cole allowed himself to be lead, too much in shock to do anything else. Only Yndrel managed to follow them out. The crowd could truly be called a river now, and he could not see Cas or any of the

other troopers beneath its flow.

There was yet another scream, and another overlaid. And then one another, deeper, more resonant. More akin to a howl. The sound struck Cole deep, plucking at some primal nerve. It was the sound of the hunt, a noise humans had not been the focus of since they gathered in caves around moss fires.

The crowd reacted as one, screaming and swarming. They tasted the terror at their backs and responded.

Cole stood on a step to the building's entrance and looked up the street. Black bodies darted among the crowd , wherever they went bodies fell from sight. To his eye it looked like the petri dishes of his work, the ones kept in the more secure labs, the ones where viruses hunted among cells, killing, eating and propagating.

And behind them, larger shapes. Two arms, two legs, like people. But that was where the similarities ended. They were too big. Much too big. They galloped on all fours at inhuman speed, standing on hind legs to lunge, extending their reach well beyond a human height, and where they made contact there were bursts of red mist and another man or woman fell.

They ate into the ragged end of the crowd like a disease, their progress frenzied, yet frighteningly purposeful.

And each fallen person was another step toward them.

Cole looked back down to the gap where the troopers had fallen, now nothing more than a swell in the torrent of bodies. "Cas!"

There was a tug at his sleeve and he realised Cabal was trying to pull him down the street. "Let's go." When Cole pulled his arm back Cabal turned back. "They're gone, Mister Cole. Make their sacrifices mean something."

With a strength he did not think he had left Cole pulled Cabal's hand free.

"You may be prepared to treat people as collateral, but I'm not." He

had to shout to make his voice heard above the rush. It was like standing in a storm; one Cole now turned around and waded back into.

He forced his way back to where he left the crowd, more wading than walking, and found the hump which was where the squad fell.

“Cas!”

There was a break in the flow, and from between running legs Cole saw a still set of boots, braced against the oncoming tide. They heaved and the solid flow of people ruptured as Cas stood, pushing herself against the rush, holding Symonds under one arm. She looked around disoriented, mouth open and breathing hard.

“Here!” Cole had to scream above the din. The urgency that made his skin prickle gave his voice a shrill tone. She looked over and pushed his way.

Her progress was slow, hindered by Symond’s limp body and the people constantly pushing against her.

She wasn’t going to make it. Cole went to reach her, was knocked immediately by a man rushing by, another clawed at his face as he stepped into her path. Something impacted in his gut, forcing the air from his throat, and he began to fall onto the ground again.

A hand caught him before he could, pulling him upright.

Cabal smiled at him. “You wait here.” He gently pushed Cole into Yndrel’s hands, and waded into the throng. Elbows, knees and hands made path, meeting Cas. They took one of Symond’s arms each over their shoulders and together hauled him out of the crowd.

Belatedly Cole went to their side, shrugging off Yndrel’s leathery grip and pushed Cas free, taking Symond’s other arm.

“We. We went down. Too. Many people,” she said through deep breaths.

“Where’s everyone else?” said Cole.

Cas shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Beside him Symonds moaned and pushed against Cole and Cabal’s hold.

“It’s OK, Symonds, “said Cabal. “We have you.”

The impact was so sudden that Cole did not react straight away, his senses simply did not react that fast. One moment he and Cabal held Symonds, the next something heavy landed between them, tearing Symonds free of their holds and crushing him into the ground.

The shriek seemed to arrive afterwards, travelling slower than the thing it came from, descending like some great bird of prey, to hack at Symonds with recurved talons. It punched down again and again, freeing padded armour and skin from the trooper’s back. Symonds could not even attempt to cry out his lungs were lacerated.

The thing on his back tilted its head up and let forth a roar which sprayed ropes of translucent salvia into the air. Cole could feel the wet heat coming off the thing. It radiated a cloying foulness which brought a feeling of nausea to the back of his throat.

It was between him and Cabal. Even hunched it was taller than any of them. It was close enough to touch, its hands and forearms dripped with Symonds. It finished its roar and swung its hairless head towards Cabal.

“No!”

There was a pop, little louder than a light globe cracking in the encompassing sound surrounding them. It was followed by more. *Pop. Pop, pop.*

Under each report the monster shook. It turned to Cas, holding her pistol in the standard marine double-handed grip; feet apart, shoulders square. She stood less than five meters away, a look of determined anger on her face.

It rumbled a growl from deep within its chest. A wet purr that vibrated Cole's diaphragm.

Then it leapt, the launch of such a heavy body minced Symonds' remains, and scored grooves in the pavement, directly at Cas.

She was ready. It was obvious her muscles could not match the creatures. So she let gravity do the work, and let herself drop and roll from its path. It sailed over her and she pressed the pistol into its soft sides, and fired the gun in a single automatic burst.

The creature roared and twisted in midair. It landed awkwardly on its shoulder, chitinous skin cracking the concrete.

It tried to right itself, rolling turtle like. It rocked past its zenith and a heavy boot met its chest. Cas almost had to mount the thing to bring her weight to bear.

The creature blinked, as if it were surprised to see her there, and she fired into its face.

Its head snapped back under the impact, distending its neck until the workings beneath were visible under the skin.

Immediately its head rolled back without a mark noticeable on its face.

Cas looked more surprised than frightened as its hand reared back, the stained claws constricted into a wicked point.

The iron bar struck it just below the wrist. Cole put all his medical knowledge to good use, picking the spot where the hardened skin would be the weakest. He was rewarded with a sound from the creature that, while still a roar, held a different timber than before. At once its attention snapped from Cas to him.

"Didn't like that, did you?" He hefted the bar, wrested from the building's stair rail, and swung it again at the same spot. A satisfying crunch vibrated up the metal.

"Does it hurt? Does it, you bastard?"

Without warning its other arm swiped Cas from its chest and it bounded to its feet.

Cole backed off, but did not turn to run. He braced his feet apart, and weighed the bar. It looked ridiculous against the monstrosity he faced, but he felt oddly calm facing the thing down.

It looked at him, their eyes on a level despite its squatting pose. It cocked its head doglike to one side and a clicking sounded from the back of its throat.

Cole didn't move. "Come on, then." And he raised the bar like a batter.

"Hey!" A small rock hit the creature's head, and it turned to look. A pinprick of red light appeared in the centre of its brow, and its head exploded.

Without changing posture its body pitched forward, the hardened skin striking the ground and making the concrete shake beneath Cole's feet.

"Nice shot, Yndrel."

"Thanks, boss."

The alien shouldered his rifle, its long barrel releasing a delicate wisp of smoke into the air.

Cole could not take his eyes off the fallen beast. The realisation of what almost happened hit him and he felt like he might throw up.

"You okay?"Cas came up beside him, holding her ribs but otherwise unhurt. He nodded.

"You did good," she said. He nodded again.

A booming rumble surrounded them, deep enough to make the skin shiver on his bones. It rumbled like an avalanche between mountain peaks, and it came from the direction they ran from.

Cole looked. They all looked. What came around the street corner made each of them question what they thought was happening on Gaian, and the horrors such a vast galaxy could hold.

Cole had thought he knew fear before, but that was a weak, thin emotion compared to the nightmare that walked his vision. What he had thought was fear was a concern for his own personal wellbeing. What he saw now surpassed such a narrow view of peril. What stalked the streets of Gaian was not simply death. It was extinction. The ending of all, the eater of worlds and species, entropy made violent. A force of the universe which would simply not stop until everything, *everything*, in the galaxy was dead and its purpose had been fulfilled.

All that passed through Cole's mind before the thing roared. A physical force of sound which drove all sound before it, and he had to reassess everything which just passed through his mind.

A staccato series of flashes erupted from a half demolished building opposite it. Figures clambered over the rubble. They wore grey plated armour Cole knew to be bulky and imposing, but against the monster they faced they were like children. Children who were running.

Tiny puffs of dust kicked up from the wall behind the creature. Logic demanded that some of the fusillade must have hit, but it showed no sign of that. It turned on the figures, retreating tactically, one group covering another under a hail of fire, leapfrogging away.

It turned at the hip, then let forth with another bellow as it twisted back with the awful slowness sheer size tricks the eye with. Its arm extended as it came, a fist the size of an engine block balled, and it struck the corner of a building. The wall exploded outwards in a shower of debris like it had detonated.

The rubble flew across the street, impacting the retreating troopers in a rain of debris.

The building side they occupied disappeared under a dirty cloud.

No more gunfire came, and the creature planted one massive foot forward and leaned in to scream a roar of utter defiance.

Cole knew then that there was nothing on the planet that could stop that thing. And before it came more of the bounding monsters, and before them a horde of the men and women of Gaian, lurching on ungainly feet, seeing through dead eyes.

“Time to go.” Cas had his shoulder, pulling him ungently down the street. He did not need telling twice, and turned, following Cas, Yndrel and Cabal.

They ran with what remained of the crowd. Gaian’s dipping sun threw out increasingly long shadows, confusing their paths. Behind them, the sound of a thousand stumbling footfalls seemed thrillingly close.

Around him, the crowd seemed too thin, too few people now ran on and Cole felt the chilling sensation they were the only people left on the planet.

The thought nearly made him forget where there running. “There! That way!” he pointed down and alley. They left the main street without slowing, leaving the crowed behind. The sudden quiet was eerie, accentuated by the low sun cutting the world up into slats of shadow and the orange glaze of late afternoon.

And then they were there, before the row of dock front warehouses where it felt like everything started all those weeks ago.

They ran between the buildings and emerged onto the dock front. Cole breathed hard, sweat dripped from his eyebrows and his hands shook. But despite that his blood turned cold.

There was nothing there. No troopers . No shuttle.

He laughed. It seemed that was the only thing left in the universe he could do.

Cabal put his finger to his ear. “When you’re ready, Bendramin.”

The water beside the dock began to fizz, then boil, and like some ancient beast rising from the depths, a shuttle rose up from beneath the surface. Water cascaded from its sides to blow into rainbows in the fading light.

As it came level with the docks the back lowered in a ramp and Bendramin's large frame appeared in the doorway, and when Cole took his hand he had never felt anything so welcoming in his life.

The big alien looked around as Yndrel jumped in last, and turned to Cabal with a sad look on his face. Cabal shook his head and Bendramin accepted that with a quick nod and hit the door close button.

The shuttle was a single, open space. All the walls had been removed for greater room, allowing anyone in the hold to see through the tinted screen in the cockpit. Foldaway seats swung from the hold walls and Cas pushed Cole into one before taking up her own. Before Cabal took his own seat up front Cole felt his insides grow heavy. The view through the front port filled with golden sunlight as the craft yawed and gained altitude.

Cole had only ever been aboard one shuttle before. That was a huge thing, a corporation lifter, designed for ferrying vast numbers of people to populate worlds, and his entire time aboard that he had no idea when he was moving or stationary. This shuttle was the polar opposite. Small, old, and the feeling of velocity was transferred from the outside directly through his seat. He already felt the motion sickness kick in before they began to pick up speed and he heard the fuselage begin to shake.

The shuttle swung around until he could see where they were heading; the hole through the Bubble, the channel through which the tanker's took to Gaian's oceans. He had always thought it looked huge from the waterfront. Hundreds of metres high. But now with it approaching by the second he was beginning to reassess that judgement.

"Is this thing safe?" He had to shout above the engine whine.

Bendramin said, "So long as no one starts shooting at us we'll be

fine."

A constellation of lights across the cockpit lit up simultaneously, flashing in time with a rising alarm tone.

Bendramin said nothing.

"You're kidding me, right?" said Cole.

"Sub-nuclear detonation, downtown Prime," said Cabal, his fingers dancing over the cockpit readouts. "Initial pulse register bearing zero six hundred. Impact five seconds. How long to the opening?"

"Six seconds," said Bendramin flatly.

The shaking inside the shuttle took on a brief, urgent tone. The craft's skin rattled until it buzzed, then the whole shuttle bucked. The aft sprung like it had been kicked. Cole's head slammed into the seat rest and he had brief impression of water filling then entire view portal. The shuttle alarms screamed for attention and Cole had to shut his eyes. The movement and noise numbed him with sensory overload and he could feel his conscious fading.

With a supreme effort he opened one eye. Then the other. If this was his last moment he would see how he would die.

The front view was still dominated by blue sea. Bendramin fought with the controls, his thick muscles knotting as he pushed on the yoke until Cole was sure it would snap off. As he watched, wispy grey began to claw up from the bottom of the view screen, slowly growing until it took up half of the screen, and continued to creep upwards.

He could not understand what he was seeing until, when the white took up almost the whole screen, Bendramin relaxed his grip and pushed the yoke to one side, and the whole view flipped.

He completely missed the vomit-inducing inertia as he realised what had happened. The explosion had knocked the shuttle around and Bendramin had flown them through the hole upside down.

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The rebel frigate *Repercussion* was a ship of war. It was not designed to carry excess personnel, and those on board were expected to be working when not asleep. When Cole was shown his bunk he soon worked his way back in the hold. It was quiet there. More airy and less oppressive.

He found himself curling up against the pallets of supplies brought on from Gaian. They still held the odour of humid vegetation he had not realised he'd come to take for granted. It smelled of home. The only home he had known for six years. Gone now.

He had no idea how long he'd been there. In the ship's eternal now he had no way to mark time's passing. Instead he allowed himself to lose his mind in the familiar smell while it lasted.

After some time he became aware of footsteps. Cabal came down the rows of stacked pallets. Cole offered no greeting when he reached him. Cabal sat himself down, and let the silence stretch out a minute more before, "It was the same way for me."

Cole said nothing.

"You would be surprised how similarly people react in these circumstances. Even the aliens. It must be something about sentience. The need to anchor ourselves to the familiar before we can accept change."

"Shut up," Cole whispered.

"Some accept it quicker than others, but we all do in time."

"Shut up. Just shut up," he said, voice rising to almost a shout.

"What I mean to say is I know what you're going through, Mister Cole."

"Do you? Do you really? You understand how many people you allowed to be killed down there? Millions. Millions, and people I… people I knew." He slumped against the pallet. "Maybe I could have

done something different, I don't know. But you, you could. And you didn't. Instead you filmed it. That's what you were doing on the rooftop wasn't it? You were recording the whole thing like some sick snuff film."

"It's a little more complicated than that."

"Does the complication bring people back to life?"

"In a manner of speaking. The video we recorded today will save lives, Mister Cole. Pure and simple. Right now the Enforcers are wiping all records of Gaian from the CPS navigational database and scrubbing all reference to it on the public archives. They have sleeper programs whose only purpose is to seek out and corrupt any mention of the place on private drives and corporation G-Net servers. Within a week no one will be able to find any mention of the Gaian star on any database. There will be no reason to even question why it is not there. They have done this before, Mister Cole, at least fifteen times that we know of, probably more. They're keeping this away from the entire population of the Sphere, and why? To avoid panic, because panic is unprofitable."

Cabal spat the word like it tasted foul. "We could not save the people of Gaian, but the video we took today will be seen. There is a record of what the Council is willing to sacrifice, and people will act."

Cole laughed without humour. "Are you sure about that?"

Cabal didn't answer straight away. He rested back against the pallet and looked off among the rows of supplies he lost men to retrieve. "Do you know what I did before this? Before I took up arms against everything I knew?" When Cole didn't answer he continued, "I was a sports coach. A football coach, to be precise."

Cole looked up and Cabal nodded. "Eleven years spent training school students in Octavia on Luxor Eight. Don't worry, you won't have heard of it. House Boaistuau made sure its importance on the G-Net was downplayed right after they found a cobalt seam beneath Octavia, and calculated rehousing the population was too expensive compared to just poisoning the water table." Cabal went quiet

again, this time with a different look in his eyes. “It was no Gaian Prime, merely fifty thousand people. But I had to watch as each of my pupils grew sick. Boaistuau’s heavy drillers moved in without even waiting for everyone to die.”

He stood, and when he spoke again there was an edge to his voice Cole had not heard before. “You may have lost some friends today but each of those children were like my own. We are all capable of great acts, we just need a push in the right place. Yes I let people die today, but this planet was already dead, and you better believe I will make each one of their deaths mean something. But we can’t do it alone.”

Cole looked up. Cabal held out his hand, palm open.

“Are you ready to make a difference, Mister Cole?”

...END...

The Ledger

by "Owesome"

The day the plague came was the day we died. Now we're just marking time until they fill in the graves.

Red licked the tip of her pencil. Too dramatic? Maybe. But it felt right. If she was going to keep a war journal it had to have a killer first line, right? Right.

If I live to be 100, I'll never forget the first monster I saw. Flesh and bone plates twisted and gnarled, like a Mawbeast chewed up a whole chicken and spat it out in the form of seven feet of hatred. Pink and oozing, it's claws gutted Frank before he had a chance to run.

OK, even she knew that was pretty bad. Too much purple prose, for one thing.

We never should have opened that box. And because we did, we've killed this whole world.

She looked up from the battered notebook she'd found on the last supply raid. Her crew were still tense; life in the 'Zone did that to you. Even on downtime you were just waiting for the roar of an Alpha, or the whine of an Enforcer jump pack. Hun'jil was on watch and he had a good eye, but even so every moment of rest felt like a prelude to violence.

Tapyu and Emma were polishing the Party Cannon, making sure it was serviced as best they could. Tapyu's skin had seen better days. Her species needed more water than most, and with not enough water to go around she was starting to flake, like a full body dandruff, the poor blue bastard.

Fuz'jil had his headphones on, listening to God knows what. Yn'dij music ran at 400 beats per minute, and that was the *slow dance* tempo. His tail was twitching in time to the beat, and Red swore that if he kept that up it'd fall right off.

Kezcheck the Sorak and Billy the Teraton were playing chess, balancing the board on a depowered Survey drone. Billy had carved out some crude pieces from scrap metal, and he and Kezcheck had a running rivalry. They'd talk gambits and opening plays the whole way through missions if Red would let them, the maniacs.

Red tucked the journal back into her coat pocket and picked up her gun. She worked the safety and checked the clip – four rounds left, no spares – and slapped it back in, working the slide with a satisfying click.

She'd seen movement.

The camp was in a warehouse with a broken glass ceiling, open to the clear sky above. Hun'jil was on the roof, alert as ever, but he didn't have good sightlines to the interior of the building. Unless Red missed her guess, a damn Enforcer recon sneak had used this to get in through a window and lurk in the rafters.

He had a camo field, but they weren't infallible. You just had to watch for the way the light went *sideways* when it hit the field, making your eyes water.

Still acting all casual-like, Red lifted the rifle up and made like she was checking the sights, inspecting the alignment. Making sure she pointed it away from the sneak, she looked down the scope, before quickly swinging it to where the prick's center mass should be –

A loud 'crack' of gunfire sounded micro-seconds before she pulled the trigger. She felt a whistle of air on her cheek as a high-velocity round struck the stone behind her head, shrapnel digging into her cheek. She felt blood – not a lot, but blood – on her face.

Her own shot hit. The camo field fizzed out and the scout dropped ten feet to the floor. The crew jumped up at the sound, guns out. Well, except Fuz'jil, who probably thought the gunshots were part of his music or some crap. She had to have a word or ten with him later.

Emma was first to the sneak's side, Red not far behind. The mousy blonde girl dropped to her knees and examined the wound while

Red kept the rifle on his face.

“What the-” Billy started to say.

“Can the chatter, Rebs,” Red shot back. “Sweep the area. Where one rat’s hiding more are sure to follow.”

The rest of the squad – including Fuzzy, kicked to alertness by Billy – scattered and spread out, looking for trouble.

“He’s in a bad way, boss,” Emma said. She was wrestling with one of the armor plates – it had a ragged hole in it, and while it was designed to be able to be removed in an emergency, only a Corporation medic had the unlock code. She forced it open with a mighty pull, and had a look at the damage. “You tagged him good, right in the lung. Medikit can stabilize him, but it’s your call.”

“You hear that, kid?” Red said, pulling out her pistol and kneeling down to their prisoner’s level. “We can patch you up, send you home, you get to sit out the rest of this cluster-fraj in a nice cushy Corporation hospital… you just gotta make it worth my while.”

“Go… to… hell…” the scout spat back, through labored breaths.

“Already there, kid, already there.” She sighed. He really was just a kid, maybe 18, 19 at most. Probably from a poor neighborhood, signed up to get out, see the galaxy, and now he was gonna bleed to death in a dirty warehouse out of a misplaced sense of loyalty to a Corporation that saw him only as a product or a consumer. It was a damn shame.

She leaned in closer. “Kid, I’m not gonna torture you. It ain’t lady-like, you’ll bleed all over the place, and I already got enough bad memories to last me a lifetime. Emma, here, she’s a bit more impatient than I am. ‘Forcers killed her sister at a, what was it?”

“Fair wages protest, boss,” Emma’s blue eyes hardened. “She tried to unionize the dockworkers at Holifaux Spaceport, got a bullet for her troubles.”

“So as you might appreciate, she’s got some anger to work through,

and, I dunno. She feels the need to maybe work on her issues with you, I'm not gonna be happy, but I'm not gonna stop her."

"Screw… you, Rebel… crudders…" the scout said, followed by a wet chesty cough.

"Your call, kid." Red shrugged. "Emma, you wanna make our guest comfortable, I'm gonna check on the boys."

She got up, brushing off her brown overcoat. She didn't get more than two paces before the kid changed his mind.

"Wait… come back… I'll… I'll talk, just-"

Red spun on her heel. Emma was already breaking open their last medkit, getting a synthskin bandage ready and cleaning the wound with the last of their saline. Red knelt by the scout's head, and disconnected the com link from his armor.

"Thanks kid. Now I figure we got ten minutes to scramble before your backup gets here, so talk fast. I don't like what I'm hearing, well, I'd rather use this oxytube on my guys than you, so…"

"Just routine… patrol, didn't know… you'd be here."

Emma sighed. "That's crap, boss. Nearest 'Forcer base is a thousand clicks from here. Plague already moved through this sector, nothing here but scrap."

The scout's eyes flickered from Emma to Red, the sweat on his dark skin pouring out. He must've gone helmetless for the peripheral vision. Red could see the VR HUD contact lenses in place, giving his eyes a greenish tint. The wound was clean, and Emma had the unopened bandage in her hand. Red picked up a syringe and a morphine ampoule and held them before the kid's face.

"Son, you've gotta do better than that. Why're you and your team here again?" Red shook the morphine ampoule slightly to emphasize her point.

He closed his eyes, his training and loyalty warring with his desire

to not bleed out.

“There’s a ledger,” he said. “Loans and payments. Between the ‘Corp… and local banks, intergalactic traders… didn’t upload to the main servers before the Plague hit.”

Red whistled as she gave the kid the morphine, nodding to Emma who put the bandage on. She broke the seal on it and placed it over the wound, a faint electrical crackle sound barely audible as the electro-static seal kicked into place. The scout relaxed visibly.

“Ledger has maybe a couple trillion of loan data on it,” the kid continued. “HQ doesn’t… get it, all that money… records lost, has to go to… arbitration… cheaper to get us to get it back.”

“Attaboy.” Red looked at Emma, who was just hooking the oxytube to the guy’s nose. It was almost time to go. “You know where it is?”

“Classified… all I know is… one of the downtown offices… could be any of ‘em, please…”

Red reached into the kid’s belt and thumbed the emergency beacon for him. “Pack it up, Emma. He’ll live. Tell the boys we’re striking camp and heading downtown.”

The boy looked like he’d just crudded his own bed. Corporation indoctrination was a hell of a drug. When Emma had moved out of earshot, she leaned down to his ear.

“You don’t have to tell them, kid. Just say we shot you, we ran, we left behind a med-pack…”

“Easy for you… to say. Sergeant Klinko, he got this… way about him, y’know?

Red shrugged. “Your call. What’s yer name?”

“Private… Jones. Jim Jones, ma’am.”

“You look after yerself, Jim Jones, ‘cos the Corp sure won’t. Believe me, I should know.”

“Thank… thank you. For this. For the meds. I don’t…” he screwed up his face in pain.

“Just maybe aim a little to the left next time you’re shooting at us and we’ll call it even, huh?” Red flashed him a smile, finding something funny in the mental picture. “Gotta go now. Take it easy, and I’m sure we’ll see ya round, Jim Jones.”

She stood up just as Hun’jil came back in. He was frowning. Probably didn’t see the point of wasting their last meds on a ‘Forcer. She didn’t blame him. Honey had a lot more reason to hate the Corp than even Emma did. He still whimpered in his sleep.

“Ready to move out, Boss,” he said, in a loud whisper, glancing at where Private Jones was lying. Shrapnel from a frag grenade had torn out his vocal cords some years back, leaving his voice a quiet but commanding ragged whisper. “But, downtown? That sector’s still Plague’d out, and we’re not exactly sitting pretty in terms of supplies…”

“The Corp is here because they need something. If we want to hurt the Corp, we get there first. Simple as that.”

Hun’jil nodded. He might not agree, but he wasn’t going to argue the point in front of the rest of the squad.

The crew was ready, and she gave the order to double-time it out of there. She finally reached up to her cheek – shrapnel from the rock was still embedded in there, and something had ripped off her earlobe. She fumbled in her pockets and found a grubby hanky she could staunch the bleeding with.

Hun’jil wasn’t the only one unhappy with patching up the scout. She caught Billy and Tapyu muttering to each other, and Kezcheck was glaring daggers at her. That was fine. Red would have to give them a talking to later, something about compassion and honor and crud like that. About how they had to be better than the ‘Forcers, because otherwise, what was the crudding point?

Just because we’re dead already, she thought, *doesn’t mean we have to*

act like it.

***

The team marched through the ruins of the city. It was hard to believe that only a week ago the neocrete habtainers were unblemished and intact: the desperate defence by the High Marshall's private guard and the claws of the creatures unleashed by the Artifact had both taken their toll. Hun'jil and Fuz'jil were scouting ahead, their superior agility letting them pick their way through the ruins better than the others.

Red was deep in thought. Taking care of the wounded scout wouldn't slow down the Enforcers much at all, and her team was in no shape to be tangling with the Corporation's hardened killers. Not to mention what would happen if they ran into any infected on the way.

Was she being selfish? She felt like she had a lot to prove. The Rebellion had taken a chance on her, when she'd been picked up exhausted and terrified after a week of hiding from those *things*. Truth be told, she may have over-sold her experience slightly. But if she could come back with both the research and with leverage over some of the bigger firms in this sector of space, then they'd have to accept her permanently, right?

Tapyu the Sphyr jogged up to where Red was taking point. She scratched behind her head, blue flakes of skin raining down at her feet.

"Boss," she said, nervously, "I got to say I'm not too happy about this change in mission."

Red shook her head. She'd been afraid of this. "How do you mean?"

"Command sent us out here because you said you could find some hard data about the Plague. You said your sister was on the archaeological team that found the Pandora artifact, and that you knew where her research would be."

"That's true."

"So this little side trip to play Robin Hood for people we don't even know is because..."

"Following the money trail." Red shifted her rifle to her shoulder. "Sis always said that it was almost like the Shunzay Corporation knew what they would find there. They hired her company to dig in just that spot, and the odds for Shunzay not being a dummy or front for someone - well, I wouldn't pick up shares in that venture.

"The contract should be registered on the bank's registry. I'm hoping that someone at the Rebellion used to be a forensic account in a previous life, see if we can find out who knows more than they should about this Plague."

Tapyu grunted, looking thoughtful. "I still think we need to clear it with Command."

"Negative," Red said. "Next scheduled check in isn't 'til 0600, and I don't want to burn any uplink time I don't have to. If there's too much chatter..."

"Then the Enforcers can pinpoint our comsat, and shoot it down, or worse decrypt it," Tapyu finished. "Makes sense. I'm still not happy about it."

"I promise, if it's not a milk run, we'll abort."

"Uh-huh." Tapyu scratched her scalp again. "I've heard that before."

Fuzzy signalled a halt. The squad had been picking their way through a commercial sector, moving from one ruined store front to another. Kezchek had picked up a few trifles, and Tapyu a much needed bottle of water.

"I can't believe you picked up a toy robot," Honey said to Kezchek.

"It's a limited edition!" the Sorak countered. "And it transforms into a hovertank!"

"Can it," Fuz'jil said. "This is the financial district. Red, are you sure

that 'Forcer pup didn't give you anything more to go on?"

"Negative," Red replied. "Billy, how much fuel has the drone got left?"

The teraton tapped the fuel gauge on the side of the survey drone. "Five hours' worth tops." He made a thoughtful sounding rumbling noise in his gullet. "It sounds like a lot, but we'll need to keep some aside for the primary objective."

"Agreed." Red pulled her tac-slab out of her coat. The screen had cracked at some point and the compass pointed 30 degrees off of true north, and the downloaded maps were civilian traffic maps from before the Plague, but it still worked. She input the wake-up codes for Robbie the Robot, their trusty survey drone, and the team shuffled back while it's pulse-engine went through it's warm-up routine.

"I'll send Robbie on a circuit, see if we can't pinpoint which office blocks housed finance companies or share brokers." The pulse-engine was reporting green across the board, so Red signalled for take-off, plotting some waypoints for the AI to fly between.

Fuz'jil gestured to a two storey building across the street. "We should set up over there, on the roof, for the time being," he said, in his sandpapery voice. Red nodded acknowledgement and the squad moved out.

Counting on the squad to keep an eye out, Red kept half an eye on the drone's camera feed. As a rule, the financial companies on a colony tended to occupy the tallest buildings in a perpetual 'who's bigger, mine is' contest. The financial sector tended to follow new colonists like hyenas followed a lion pride – settlement companies offered shares in the venture as part of the settler recruitment package, as an incentive to stay on and work through the hardest part of a new colony's set-up. Trade in resource futures soon developed too, with Houses trying to corner the output of a new colony and on-sell the hypothetical future wealth before the colony collapsed or the early survey scans proved hopelessly optimistic. Red wondered if it was human nature, to gamble the net worth of entire planets this way – to turn the sweat and tears of the people

on the ground to abstract derivative products amounting to numbers on a touchscreen and barter other people's futures a way.

Red shrugged. A month ago she wouldn't even have questioned it. Obviously she was hanging out with the wrong crowd.

Her introspection and focus on the drone meant she was completely unprepared when the Plaguehounds jumped them.

Billy had just opened the door to the fire escape they were going to take when the Plaguehound had jumped up at him. Instinctively the giant warrior swung his ceremonial wrist-blade toward the charging monster, and struck, point-first, right in its maw. The beast's momentum carried it forward, the blade's razor-sharp edge neatly bisecting the beast's head along the jaw-line.

Red drew her pistol, moving the tac-slab to her off hand. Fuz'jil swung about and fired a few rounds to the squad's rear with his rifle, tagging two more of the mutated dogs as they came into the foyer of the building from the front door.

"Everyone, up the stairs," Red ordered. More dogs were visible through the miraculously un-cracked glass. "Billy, take the rear. Lay out the welcome mat then follow us up. Fuz'jil, you got point."

The Yn'dij nodded then scurried up the stairs, keeping a low profile. The rest of the squad followed as the Plague-riddled dogs started slamming themselves against the plate glass, trying to make a new entrance. Another came through the door just as Billy fired his wrist-mounted flamethrower, the flammable jelly settling on it and the mouldy carpet, moments before it ignited.

The hound yowled in pain, it's diseased flesh crackling in the heat. The rest of the pack yowled too, the dogs ramming the glass stopping to mourn their pack-mate.

Red saw an ornate cigarette stand by the front counter, and pushed past Billy to get it. He moved to stop her but she ducked his fist, clipping the tac-slab to one of the magnetic patches on her belt. Two steps were all it took and she grabbed it, glancing at the pack while she rushed back to their exit.

The monsters had stopped, eerily silent while their companion cooked in the heat. They were shuddering in place, shivering like they had suddenly contracted a fever.

“Come on, Red!” Billy yelled, an angry rumble in his throat accentuating his displeasure. Red had stopped to stare at what the creatures were doing.

As she watched, cuts opened up on the beast’s flanks and joints. They didn’t bleed, but glistened grotesquely in the firelight, the muscular tissue red and throbbing. Suddenly, a mucous-like fluid welled up in the cuts and spread over the bodies of the hounds, quickly hardening in the air with a green sheen that reminded her of dried snot.

The lead dog took a tentative step into the flames, and did not burn.

“Holy crud,” Red muttered, and turned to run to the fire door where Billy waited. Without an order from her, Billy fired a grenade into where the pack was thickest, the explosion scattering the newly armoured and apparently fire-proof monsters in all directions.

She pushed past him and he slammed the door shut, jamming it in the frame. Red held up the cigarette stand.

“Nail it shut,” she said. Billy nodded, ripped off the base of it and used his prodigious strength to force the pole’s jagged edge through the hardened plastic and into the door jamb.

“It won’t hold forever,” Billy warned as they took the steps two at a time to rejoin the others.

“It won’t have to,” Red said. “Is this office going to burn down around us?”

Billy’s throat made a few staccato bursts that Red took to be laughter. “The fire won’t spread beyond the jelly. I’ll need five minutes to reload the cartridges on the launchers, though.”

“You’ll get it.” Red furrowed her brow. *Instantaneous mutation in*

response to external stimuli, she thought. The samples she'd seen back in the lab hadn't been that fast, hadn't been that *specific.* In tests, if you had damaged a sample with hydrochloric acid you were as likely to get prehensile tentacles as you were to get damaged tissue repaired. Was it because the infection had been active longer?

Was the infection learning?

The squad had set up on the roof. Tapyu and Emma were loading the Party Cannon with one of the few TA-Zero missiles they had left. Kezchek was laying sporadic suppressive fire down on the Plaguehound pack, the concussive blasts from his rifle keeping them disorganised. Fuzzy and Honey had secured the walkway to the next building, just in case any more Plague forms were across the way. Billy kept watch on the stairwell – nothing was getting past the teraton in a hurry.

The tac-slab beeped insistently at her – she realized, belatedly, that it had been beeping at her the whole way up the stairs. She unhooked it from her belt.

The AI in the drone had completed its sweep. Of the three likely office buildings, only one was intact, the Weststar Conglomerated Alliance, and Robbie had helpfully identified a route that ran mostly along walkways and roof-tops to get there.

Robbie also had a sub-routine that kept an eye open for hostile contacts, helpfully marking the tactical map with a red dot corresponding with size and last time recorded – most recent contacts in bright red, fading to pink as time went on, with speed and direction noted where available.

The streets around them were an ocean of red dots, all converging on the building they were in. Red felt the colour drain from her face.

Tapyu noticed. "What's the problem, boss?" The TA-Zero was assembled and loaded. She patted it fondly, leaving Emma to haul it onto her shoulder. Tapyu stood and approached Red. Hun'jil looked away from the neighbouring rooftop, noticed the look on Red's face, and came over to check what was wrong.

Red wordlessly turned the tac-slab around so they could both see the situation. Tapyu laughed, mirthlessly.

“Some milk run, boss,” she said. “So, what’s the plan?”

Red said nothing.

“If there’s this many plague forms here,” Hun’jil offered, “There’s got to be an Alpha. Look at this coordination. We’ve seen them without stars to guide them – if we can cut off the head…”
“…then the body will die,” Red finished. “I’ll tell Robbie to scout for the largest contact. Billy needs to reload, and then we’ll move out.”

The teraton nodded and got to work, still keeping watch on the stairwell.

Dear Diary, Red thought, punching in Robbie’s new instructions. *Today, I wasted valuable medical supplies on an enemy and led my squad into a death trap. On the plus side, today can only improve.*

She wished she were as confident as she pretended to be. Most of all, she wished she had never opened that damn box.

***

“Private, you better have a damn good excuse for still being alive.”

Sgt Klinko’s face was obscuring the sun, giving his helmet a fiery corona that matched his scowling face. As far as Pvt Jim Jones knew, the Sergeant’s expression had two settings: Scowling, and off.

“Sorry, Sir. I’ll… lean into the bullet… next time.”

The Sergeant slapped Jim’s head, roughly, and moved away. He motioned for Cpl Mendez – the squad Medic – to move in and get to work.

“This your first time being shot, Private?” Mendez asked.

“First time… this bad, I guess.”

“You’ll get used to it.” Mendez clucked her tongue. “Who did this bandage? This synthskin’s expired two months ago. It’s going to be about as sterile as a teraton’s ass.”

Alhana Mendez unclipped the medkit, and then she took out a scalpel.

“I’m going to have to cut away the bandage – the electro-static cling will be glitched now – then see if they bothered to recover the bullet. Did they recover the bullet, son?”

Jim hated the constant jabs about his youth. Just because he was the new guy! He’d gone through hell with these men and women and this was the crap he got?

He didn’t say anything, but turned see what Klinko was up to.

The sarge was sitting on the same rock the red-headed woman had been. He was running his finger along the bullet hole from Jim’s shot earlier. He didn’t look happy, and Jim knew there was a crudstorm coming his way.
He felt a searing pain in his chest and something scrape against his rib. A strangled grunt escaped his lips and before he closed his eyes, he caught a glimpse of Alhandra holding something with more protrusions than a medical device should have.

“Take it easy, Jim – I almost got it-”

Jim screamed, and passed out.

***

When he woke, he was on a travois, being carried by Karl and Luther. From the direction of the sun it looked like they were heading downtown. Of course they were.

Karl was at his head, rifle over his shoulder. It looked like Luther had his kit – which was a worry, as Jim still owed Luther ten bucks from cards the other week and Luther might be looking to collect.

“Don’t worry Jim,” Karl said, as though he’d read Jim’s mind. “Even Luther’s not dumb enough to fill his boots from an injured trooper’s pack.”

“I heard that, Karl!” Luther shot back, turning his head.

“A miracle!” Karl said. “The monkey can speak! Evolution in action!”

“Can the chatter,” Sgt Klinko said, firmly. Everyone shut up.

Jim’s chest didn’t hurt so much. His armored vest was in the emergency ‘wings of prayer’ position, the hinges on either side folding the central plates up for medical access. He gingerly explored the area, the thick, clammy, plastic-feeling synthskin bandage rising and falling with his breathing. He pressed in, slightly, and it felt weird – you never knew how much you missed your ribs until they weren’t there anymore. The bandage must’ve been pumping him full of endorphins because it didn’t feel any more uncomfortable than exploring a hole where your tooth used to be with your tongue.

Jim had that nagging feeling that, somewhere along the line, he might have made some bad life choices.

He’d been recruited by the High Marshall’s Guards straight out of school. He figured, if it was a choice of getting shot at in outer space, or being shot at by the gang down the street, well, at least the pay was better, right?

Boot was harsh, but fair. If you put in the work, if you made the grade, it was all right. Jim came out of it was a sense of pride, and feeling like he belonged to something greater than himself – a feeling that he still had had until recently, when he got transferred to Klinko’s squad, and the Enforcers, and the Deadzone.

The first he’d heard of the Containment Protocols was when he was handed a thick sheaf of paper by a clearly less-than-impressed Klinko. “Read, newbie,” he barked, then stormed off. It was hardly the welcome into the elite band-of-brothers he’d been expecting.

Jim had never been much of a reader, and a lot of the bureaucratic double-speak tripped him up. “All life-forms in the Containment Protocol Sector should be considered an infection vector,” was pretty clear though. “All civilians have forfeited their rights, identities, and privileges under Emergency Measure 5292(d)(ii) and should be considered expendable” was another.

He wasn’t completely green. He’d had to do some things in his earlier postings that were maybe less-than-squeaky-clean. But the scale of this was something else. To just… delete a whole planet. Pretend it never existed. Treat everyone like bad inventory.

“You ever see a Plague form before, kid?” Jim remembered Karl, one of the troopers on his squad, telling him at Mess hall.

“Only the vids they got. Jeezus.” Jim looked down at his NutriChow™ soup. It was starting to crust over. “They really get that big?”

“Man, this one time- Hey, Luther! You tell it better. C’mere!”

Karl and Luther were brothers. Jim could never remember which was older, and there was less than a year between them. Their parents had been colonists on one of the neo-luddite religious charter colonies that foreswore any technology before the 21st century, and they’d jumped at the chance to go somewhere with a working holovid.

Luther had come over, followed by Pattie, the heavy weapons specialist. Jim was never able to work out if they were an item, and Pattie didn’t talk much. She was almost broader across the shoulders than Luther and Karl combined.

They sat down, Pattie next to Jim, and Luther next to his brother. The family resemblance was uncanny – the same sharp nose and green eyes. Luther put down his bowl and spread his arms wide, clearly eager to tell a favorite war story.

“All right, Jim. Jimbo. Jimmy. Listen up, because this is the story that you’re gonna want to steal and tell your grand kids. And I

swear every word is true."

Pattie had glared at him.

"Okay, okay. Mostly true. But look, picture this: Yours truly, my bro here, and Pattie, we're doing a sweep through a hab unit. You know how it is, every door's a potential booby trap, every room you burst in you never know if it's the one a dozen Soraks are in with their blasters pointed at ya. It sucks.

"So we're not surprised, exactly, when we finish the sweep, come out the fire door, turn the corner, and walk right into one of the big crudders. Bam. Right there, bigger than ten men –"

Pattie grunted again.

"All right, bigger than *five* men, or ladies, present company included. I dunno what it was doing there all alone, maybe it got lost, whatever. Anyway, we're here-"

Luther grabbed the salt shaker and put it in the middle of the table. He moved some of the knives and forks to make a makeshift T-junction, with Jim's bowl serving as the model Plague form.

"-and the bastard is just roaring at us. Pattie's been using her pistol for the sweep so the 'tube's still on her back, but we open fire anyway – might as well, right? What else are we gonna do?"

Nobody had any suggestions for what else they could've done. Pattie made a 'hurry up' motion with her left hand.

"Anyway, the frigging thing sweeps us aside like nine-pins. Bam. Karl's sent sprawling, I'm flat on my ass with my gun a million miles away, and I can't even see Pattie. I pop my wrist-blade, and this thing gets right up in my face. Drool landing right on my helmet lens. Its licking it's scabby, filthy mouth and I'm desperately stabbing up but the blade's just glancing off, when all of a sudden, *this* crazy S.O.B," Luther pointed at Pattie, "stands over my head, out of nowhere, and jabs the missile launcher right in his fat face and pulls the trigger."

Some of the other tables were looking at them now. Pattie ducked her head, not liking the attention.

Luther continued. “Little known fact about the Mark 4 missile, though: It needs a couple of seconds of flight-time to arm itself. It’s supposed to be a safety procedure. So Pattie gets sent flying by the rocket burn, I get scorch marks on my best armor, and Slappy has a huge crudding fire-cracker in his mouth, staggering backwards, all ‘buh-wuh-wuh,’ must’ve been the biggest shock in his sad little life.

“I crawl ass-backwards away from the monster just as the thing has a grip on the rocket and tears it out of its mouth, throwing the missile to the ground in front of it, and then – BANG!”

Luther slapped the table right next to Jim’s bowl of gruel. The turgid liquid slowly splashed up, slopping on Jim’s fatigues.

“The frigging fuse’d armed itself, and the missile went off right at it’s feet. Blew the ugly crudder to Kingdom Come. Splashed me and Pattie here with all its guts, which is *why,* young Jim-”

Luther turned from his audience, abruptly, and pointed a finger at Jim’s NutriChow™ soaked shirt.

“That’s why you *always* wear your Corporation issued all-in-one protect-o-matic personal armor and hazmat suit, helmet included. Because you never know when you’ll be swimming in dirty, sticky, nasty-smelling, mucous-looking guts.”

The rest of the hall was laughing. Jim figured that this must be a hazing thing, and grinned through it.

“That’s a hell of a story, Luther,” Jim said, mopping at himself with some paper napkins.

“The Deadzone’s a hell of a place, son.” Luther’s eyes were glinting, even as Pattie – the putative hero of the tale – was fixing her gaze on her alleged meal. “But stick with us. We’ll get you through it.”

“’The’ Deadzone?” Jim looked up. “I thought this Containment Protocol was more than a one-off.”

Luther's eyes hardened, suddenly serious. "There's only one Deadzone, kid. And it never leaves you."

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The sun had moved into Jim's eyes – it must be late afternoon, he figured. The streets were deserted, no civvies, Plague, or Rebs in sight. Just broken ruins and vacant Shenzen Company habtainers as far as the eye could see. Sgt Klinko motioned for a stop, and waved the team together.

"We'll rest up here," he said, pointing to a container unit that was a bit sturdier than some of the others. It had functioned as a bank, by the look of it. "Karl, Luther, you take watch. Al, Pattie, you take next shift. Al, I'm gonna want you to get our boy Jim here on his feet when I'm done with him."

The team settled in. Karl and Luther set up on the roof, their jetpacks meaning they'd have easy access to the rest of the team if necessary. It was subtle, but looking at it with a soldier's eye you could tell that the building had been reinforced as a fall-back station in the event of a planetary revolt – they had good sight-lines over the rest of the block, and the staggered layout of the streets would funnel a mob through several kill zones that would only be obvious from the rooftop.

Alhandra made Jim comfortable behind the teller counter. She started fussing with the synthskin bandage, making sure the device was administering the correct drugs and nanomachine antibodies.

"Listen, Jim…" she said, whispering. "I know why you did what you did."

"I didn't do anything," Jim said. His breathing was better now.

"Don't kid a kidder. You're technically a traitor, and Sarge would be right to shoot you dead."

Jim groaned. It'd been all very well for the red-haired Rebel lady to tell him to lie. And the truth was, Jim felt like shit for telling them

about the ledger. He was a traitor, and a coward.

He thought back to his first meeting with the Sergeant. Not really the first one, but “Welcome aboard, maggot” didn’t really count as a proper sit-down.

Klinko had fixed him with a steely, gray-eyed stare. He was a man in his late-middle age, of stocky build. His hair was very close-cropped. He wore his dress uniform even off duty, the top button firmly done up and his service ribbons pressed flat.

“You are not welcome here,” Sgt Klinko had said. “You are an interloper. An irritant. You are *scum,* Jones, and I shall treat you as such until you prove otherwise.”

Jim was used to this. This was standard, break-you-down-then-build-you-up talk from any squad leader to a new transfer. But what he wasn’t used to was the sheer venom in his words, the personal hatred Klinko clearly brought to the ritual.

“You are replacing a great man, Jones. A man who was taken from us before his time - a loyal friend, an excellent soldier. A dear heart, filled with love and promise, cruelly cut down in the prime of his life. *You,* Jones, are sheiz. You are worse than sheiz. You are the droppings that hang on the dog’s arsehole once it’s crapped out its filth. You are the leavings that aren’t even *good enough* to leave with the other sheiz.”

Klinko was leaning right into Jones’ face now, his spittle landing on Jones’ cheek. He dared not move or wipe it off.
“I don’t expect you to serve, Jones. I expect you to *die,* horribly, through your own incompetence. I expect one of the monsters we fight to pick you up and snap you in two, and ram your useless torso into its maw and chew on your putrescence.”

Klinko opened his hands and gripped Jones by his lapels, lowering his voice in tone to an almost tender rage.

“Until that day,” he continued, “you will do *exactly* as you are told. You will kill what I tell you. You will piss when I tell you. If I tell you to *clean* yourself with your *tongue* you will grab your thighs,

bend over and lap away like a cat and you will *swallow,* Jones. Do I make myself clear?"

"…Yessir, sir. Sergeant Klinko, Sir."

"When that day comes and the Gen One is gnawing on your corpse, I will expect you to still be fighting, Jones. When it craps you out you will make its arsehole burn. And when that happens, then, and *only* then, will I consider you to have been a good soldier. Do I make myself clear, Private?"
"Crystal, sir."

"You're goddamn right. Dismissed, Private."

Jones shook his head at the memory. Alhandra was looking at him.

"You all right, Private?"

"Just thinking, Al. I'll take my lumps." He sighed. "How's my wound doing?"

Alhandra pushed a few buttons on her tablet, and the armor panels in his chest folded back into place. "You'll live. I'm clearing you for duty – the nanos should have that rib re-grown with plastics in a few hours and the armor will hold up until then. You'll be a bit short of breath but I'll tell the nanos to get to work on the lungs next. Keep the synthskin on for a fortnight – I can reprogram it from here if there are complications."

Jim grinned like an idiot. "You're an angel, Alhandra."

She grinned back. "Don't thank me. It's all the nanomachines, son."

"If you two are done playing Doctors and Nurses," Sgt Klinko growled, "I need to have some words with your patient here."

Alhandra threw the Sergeant a quick salute, stood up and walked away. Klinko sat cross-legged next to Jim's travois, his helmet off. He held a tablet as well.

"I've been reviewing the camera feeds from your armor, Jones.

Some friends you've got there."

"They're not my friends, sir," Jim returned.

"The audio cuts out after a while, but the video's fine. It shows you talking, the woman walking away, then walking back, then the blonde patching you up. It sure looks like you're pretty good at making friends if you ask me."

Jim's pulse quickened. He heard, distantly, Alhandra's tablet make an insistent beep – she must've punched a button or something, because his heart-rate quickly came back under control.

"I'd be no good to you dead, Sarge."

"That's up for debate." Klinko returned his eyes to the tablet, moved the video feed forward to a clear picture of the redheaded woman's face. "But I'll let you live, because in your own uniquely crudheaded way, you've just given us an opportunity. Do you know who this is?"

Jim thought quickly. The briefing papers he'd had on this mission seemed like a million years ago. He shook his head. "Some crud-faced Rebel scum, sarge?"

"Oh yes, my little parrot. But not just any crud-faced Rebel scum. This, my boy, is Rachael Fairburn. This particular little trouble-maker was part of the science team that unearthed the Pandora artifact that started this whole mess. Miss Fairburn just happens to be a person of interest, and by telling her where we're going, you've given us a chance to bag two missions in one shot."

"Thank you, sir," Jim said.

"So I am going to choose to believe that rather than mewling, begging for your life from our enemies, you took some unexpected initiative for once in your cruddy little life," Sgt Klinko continued, "and lured this target of opportunity into a location where we can successfully ambush them and capture or kill the target while fulfilling our primary objective. If we are successful, then all will be forgiven." Sgt Klinko dropped the tablet, leaned right into Jim's

face, and jabbed his finger right under Jim's chin. "But if we fail, Jimmy-boy, then I will *personally* fraj you in ways you never imagined you *could* be frajed. There will be *pain,* boy. Pain and rage. Do you understand me, you dim-witted little cretin?"

Jim swallowed. "Crystal, Sarge. Frajing, sarge. Pain and rage. Yessir."

"Excellent. I'm glad we have reached this rapport, Private."

The Sergeant stood up and left. Jim pushed himself up into a sitting position, and glanced over at Alhandra, who gave him a cheerful thumbs-up.

Jim was just retrieving his gear from where Luther had left it when the explosion rang out.

"ORX!" Karl yelled, and Jim could hear rifle fire rattling out. Jim rammed his helmet on, triggered the seals, and grabbed his pistol – his wrist-blade was already humming in its housing, its emergency start-up protocol activated by Jim flexing his wrist a certain way.

He saw Klinko and Mendez take up positions on either side of the door. The only windows were narrow ones facing to the main street; he positioned himself by the rear door.

His com unit crackled back to life. It was Karl. "Maybe twelve contacts by the optics. One Ripper suit we can see. Confirmed Pyro."

"Acknowledged," Klinko barked back. "Pattie, get to high ground. Al, you're with me. Kid, pop the stealth and get the drop on them. Move it!"

Jim nodded acknowledgement and activated the camo field. He didn't know how it worked – and the encounter earlier today proved that it was far from infallible – but the slight shimmer in the air visible from the inside of the field was a still a comfort to him. Jim burst through the rear door and found himself in a corridor leading to a fire exit. There was a vault, open, and he could see money spread out all over the floor. Just lying there.

He was momentarily tempted, but the adrenaline moved him forward, kicking down the door into the alley.

He was confronted with the Orx Pyro. The pilot light on his burner was bright, and Jim imagined he could hear the hydraulic chamber drawing more fuel into the barrel of the gun –

Jim pushed away the barrel of the burner with his left arm just as it spat out its fiery load. His wrist-blade popped out with a solid metallic *chunk* sound even as he brought his fist up towards the Orx' chin. The blade shot up into its skull and out the other side effortlessly, the energy field of the blade causing the commando's sparse hair to stand on end.

The flamer continued to burn as the Orx fell, shutting off only when Jim took the time to sever the cheap metal barrel with his wrist-blade. No sense in leaving a fire hazard by the fall-back position. With no other enemies in sight, he sprinted behind the next-door biz-unit and retracted the wrist blade before jumping up to the roof to assess the situation.

The situation was FUBAR. He could see about nine Orx in a rough semi-circle around the front of the bank, and a ripper suit standing in the open, spraying a constant stream of bullets at the bank. Even if Pattie could get a rocket off, there was a very good chance the damn maniac would shoot it down before it hit him.

Nine Orx, plus one in the alley. That meant one or two unaccounted for. He swept his eyes over the high-rise buildings behind the bank, and caught the tell-tale glint of a scope on an office block behind Karl and Luther.

"SNIPER!" Jim yelled, running towards the building. It'd be a stretch, but if he was lucky the jump pack would get him to at least the balcony, after which he could climb up and gank the wretch. Luther and Karl dived away from their spots just as the shot rang out – Karl grunted over the com relay, and Jim couldn't tell if it was pain or from the landing – as Jim fired his jets and sailed through the air to the balcony, taking wild shots to drive the goblin sniper into cover.

He needn't have worried. Luther popped up from behind an aircon unit and shot the crudder right in the face.

"You're out of position, rookie," Klinko growled.

"Sorry for trying to save our guys, sir."

"Quit the attitude. They're Enforcers, they save themselves."

A loud amplified voice rang out across the road. "Hello, metal people! It is I, Commander Hockslock! We wish to negotiate for your shiny lives!"

"Aw hell," Alhandra said. "Not this maniac."

"I think I'm hit, Sarge." Karl audibly sucked in some air. "Got my shoulder. Can still fight though."

"Attaboy, Karl," Sgt Klinko said. "Take some notes, Jim, that's how a real trooper takes a hit."

Jim was about to reply but then thought better of it. His HUD was showing a waypoint, three buildings over, which should give him a better view of the Orx position. He kept the camo field on and started sprinting for it, using short jet-pack hops to help him over the biz-units.

"We know you are in the money-house, shiny people!" the Orx commander continued. "We like moneys! You give us moneys, you live, yes? Easy-peasy!"

Sgt Klinko replied over his suit's in-built loudhailer. "How do we know you'll let us live, Orx?"

"You wound me, shiny person! Commander Hockslock is famous for his trustworthiness!"
Alhandra muttered over the com relay. "More like famous for being a nutter."

"We have stand-off! You decide, we wait! Thirty minutes, shiny

humans, then we come and take the moneys!"

Jim was in position. The HUD was blinking "Stand by." Sarge and Mendez must be working on a plan.

He looked at the sun again. Time was ticking away. If they didn't sort this mess out soon, then the rebels would get the ledger with no opposition, and be long gone before they arrived in the mission zone.

And it would be all be his fault.

***

Commander Hockslock wasn't a gambling man, but if he was, he would've bet 5000 credits that the lonely-looking salaryman at the bar wouldn't live through the night.

"I bet you 5000 credits," his friend Grushnak, said, "that the lonely-looking salaryman at the bar won't live through the night."

"Done!" Hockslock exclaimed, draining his pint and slamming the glass back on the table.

It was a quiet night in the Missing Sorak pub. Of course, for a bar frequented by mercenaries and thieves, a quiet night only meant that the stabbings, pick-pocketing, and occasional punch-up occurred infrequently rather than constantly. While Corporation office workers did visit this side of town from time to time, they usually came in large entourages flanked by teraton bodyguards so they could experience the thrill of slumming it without risk of contracting a nasty case of being stabbed in the face.

No, the young man at the bar clearly had problems. His first problem was wearing a very nice suit in a very rough part of town. This told Commander Hockslock that he was rich. His second problem was that he was drinking Judwan whiskey. This told Commander Hockslock that he was desperate – Judwan whiskey was famous for being simultaneously very alcoholic and not terribly good, and was generally drunk by those in a hurry to fall down unconscious in a puddle of their own crud.

As it happened, Hockslock was an excellent problem-solver. Granted, the problems he solved fell into a very specific area of expertise – namely, if the problem could be solved with copious amounts of violence and small arms fire, then Commander Hockslock was the action-oriented, goal-focused, force application specialist you wanted to call on. More problems in the world of Corporation high finance were solved that way than one might expect from reading the financial pages.

“I think,” Hockslock said to Grushnak, “That I will ask our young friend to unburden himself of his troubles, yes?”

Grushnak frowned. Nobody frowned like an Orx, Hockslock thought. We have very expressive foreheads.

“That’s cheating,” Grushnak said. “You help him out, you forfeit the bet.”

Hockslock grinned, revealing his perfectly polished and capped teeth. Image was important in his line of work, and if one wanted to make an impression on a client and secure repeat business, one should always consider presentation.

“New bet,” he offered to his lieutenant. “I bet you *ten* thousand credits that I can get a job out of him.”

“A job? From *him*?” Grushnak snorted.

At the bar, the young man was talking to a tall Nameless One in fishnet tights. She had rouged face-tentacles, and body-glitter all over her exposed shoulders.

“You’re on,” Grushnak said, spitting into his palm and holding out his hand. Hockslock grinned even wider, did the same and shook his hand.

Hockslock pushed his chair away from the table and walked over to the man. He caught the end of the conversation as he approached the bar.

"…with a melon," the girl said, wiggling her tentacles suggestively.

"Tandy," Hockslock said, "I know you're just trying to cheer the boy up." Tandy pouted. "How about I buy you a drink, and you leave us to talk for a minute?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I'll have a mimosa. With a cherry." Hockslock slid over his card and nodded at the bartender. "And a little umbrella on a stick," Tandy continued.

When the bartender gave her the drink, Tandy made a little shimmy as she blew a kiss to the kid over her left shoulder. Hockslock rolled his eyes as the boy blushed.

"So," Hockslock said, draping a heavy, comradely arm over the trader's shoulders. With his other hand he gestured to the bartender for more drinks. Schloe, a sphyr who worked the graveyard shift and had seen Hockslock do this dance many times, rolled his eyes and made to pour two handles of Hockslock's favorite ale. "You, sir, look like a man with problems."

The businessman must have been no older than 25, if Hockslock was any judge. He had the olive complexion common to many humans in this corner of the Galactic Co-Prosperity Sphere, and his eyes were red and puffy from recent weeping. Hockslock took note of his fashionable, no-nonsense haircut, and his expensive retro-chrono – a recent craze that he'd read about in the *Entrepreneur* holo-mag among young executives, where they would pay top dollar for inaccurate, gear-and-spring-driven timepieces in lieu of a regular chrono, counting on their iLens to keep them connected to the planetary datasphere. Hockslock pegged him as a hungry young pup, trying to muscle his way into the mawbeast pack that was interplanetary finance.

As an entrepreneur himself, Hockslock found it prudent to keep abreast of the latest trends and fashions in the executive class. Market research. He found it helped him make the right pitch in situations like these.

"Problems?" the human asked, sneering. "Oh, I got problems. Problems you couldn't even imagine."

The man turned his bar stool to face Hockslock, blindly groping for a drink. Schloe put down a tankard within his reach, and the man nearly knocked it over.

“Can you imagine a trillion credits? A hundred trillion?” he continued. Hockslock nodded. He imagined that much money in his sleep, every night. “Can you imagine me, sitting on a deal that would make that much money and more… vanishing, overnight. Poof!”

The man waved his free hand in the air dismissively while pausing to take a sip of the beer. “Of course you can’t. You’re an Orx. A brute. Whereas *I* am – or was – a financial genius, holding the future of worlds in my hand.”

Oh goody, Hockslock thought. *A racist.* Hockslock took pride in his work, but he really enjoyed it when his marks turned out to be bigots as well as stupid and desperate.

“You tell me, yes?” he said, slipping into what he thought of as his ‘me dumb Orx’ dialect. “Sometimes it helps to talk.”

“I work in resource futures,” the man said. “I’m good at it. I’m *great* at it. The trick is to jump in when the time is right – when a new colony gets established the colonizing company is looking to secure their future output, right? Make sure that they’ll get steady revenue for their raw materials, whether that’s mining products, exotic agriculture, rare drugs, whatever – whatever drew them to go through all the expense of setting up a risky venture like a new colony, the management doesn’t care about anything except return on investment - which is where guys like me come in.

“Guaranteed revenue stream. No sweeter words in the Corporate lexicon. A broker like me takes a look at the mineral surveys, then steals the colonist’s *actual* mineral surveys, and then sends spies to do *our own* mineral surveys, and based on that we bid and trade on the expected future production of that colony. If you’re clever you can get the contract for cheaper than it’s worth, then fling it off to a different, more gullible trader for a lot more than it’s worth. These contracts can change hands a thousand times before some dumb

settler even picks up a pickaxe."

Hockslock nodded, keeping his face the picture of wide-eyed rapt attention. He knew all this already – he and his boys had stolen, destroyed, or extorted the reports the executive was talking about in more backwater worlds than he cared to remember. But the guy liked to hear himself talk, so Hockslock let him.

"So when a new planet in the Delta Phi Eta system is looking for a buyer," the man continued, "and their survey report comes in as under-reporting the true value of their uranium and helium-3 stockpiles, I snap it up, manage to secretly leak the real reports, and set off a bidding frenzy the likes you've never seen. 100 trillion credits. The largest trade of my career. The bosses are talking about junior partnership in the firm. Then, an hour before the deal is meant to close…"

"…the planet disappears," Hockslock added.

"…the planet disappears," the man finished, drunkenly ignoring him. "Just gone, vanished from the face of the datasphere. Nothing in Wikipodia, nothing in the news, nothing in the star charts – and a lot of very important, very powerful people looking very stupid and looking for someone to blame."

Hockslock felt his heart start racing, but kept his expression fixed into paternalistic concern. "They leave you holding the baggies, yes? Dangling by the short and curled?"

The human nodded, moaned, and sunk his head back into the bar.

A containment protocol, the Orx thought. *A fresh one, and rich too, if this idiot is telling the truth.*

"My friend," he said to his crying companion, "I believe I can help, yes?"

"What can you do?" was the muffled response, the futures trader said, keeping his head on his arms.

"Allow me to introduce myself." Hockslock brought himself to his

full height and thrust out his impressive jaw. “I am famed gentleman adventurer, Commander Hockslock.”

This got the trader’s attention. He sat bolt upright and stared.

“Commander Hockslock?” he managed. “I read your blog!”

***

That had been a week ago. The trader had kept the co-ordinates to the planet on a piece of paper he kept tucked into the casing of his watch – a good luck charm of sorts, until the deal was put through. The *Sweet Muhurghah*, Hockslock’s custom FTL cruiser, was able to get to the planet in a day’s time. With some deft flying they had managed to sneak past the Enforcer blockade – although, to be fair to the Enforcers, keeping a tight lock-down of millions of kilometers of open space was trickier than you might think – and for the last few days Hockslock and his team had been picking through the rubble of the colony on the way to the brokerage where the details of the deal were being kept.

Of course, they would’ve been remiss if they hadn’t taken the opportunity to loot – sorry, to repurpose and recycle – some of the discarded riches of the colony. No self-respecting gentleman adventurer could possibly let defenseless credits fend for themselves in a disaster area.

His crew had been inside Containment Protocols before – the first time they had been trapped when the cordon first went up, and it had been a mad scramble to escape the planet. The second time had ostensibly been a rescue mission, and had made good material for the *Hockslock’s Heroes* blog.

He was, as far as Hockslock was aware, the only Orx mercenary to keep a public record – albeit one heavily embellished – of their adventures. He found it satisfying, and the revenue from selling the collected ebooks formed a small but steady stream of income for the band. It helped with finding jobs, too – pretty much anyone who moved in the nebulous world of high finance where a force application specialist such as himself might be required from time to time had at least heard *of* him.

Hell, there was even *Hockslock's Heroes* fan-fiction, which was… weird and often anatomically impossible.

Their looting had come out pretty well. While much of the Co-Prosperity Sphere's wealth was channeled through secure, encrypted data transfers there was always a need for hard currency – bearer bonds, precious metals or jewelry, even digital encryption keys for accounts were used as stores of value in frontier worlds like this even as the financial sector traded on the hypothetical future worth of the planet before it was ever generated.

Odds were good that their client was already dead, if he was willing to spill his guts to a stranger in a bar, which was why Hockslock had insisted on half the fee up front. There would be plenty of bidders for certified proof of the contracts lodged there, even if only to keep the existence of Delta Phi Eta secret. The thought of selling the data back to the Council of Seven was amusing, provided Hockslock could work out a way to do that that wouldn't get him killed.

His group was a mix of old friends and new hires: Grushnak had brought his "Mauler"-class assault Ripper Suit, and he'd tapped a buddy of his, Btoomba, to run another Ripper Suit festooned with guns, rocket launchers, and a pair of fuzzy dice dangling around his neck. Rudy, the sniper, was scouting ahead, and Hurlukka, the smelly *barrumba,* was lugging around an ancient flamethrower. Eight hired guns rounded out the team, a mixture of fresh blood and veterans, brought on to make up the numbers for this job.

According to the map they'd managed to download off of a busted public information kiosk, there was a bank about a block away. For the workers of the planet it would be a fixture in their life, not only depositing or withdrawing their meager earnings but using it to register contracts they'd made amongst themselves – the banks offered a secure co-location service and mediation for disputes when it came to local contracts between colonists, a kind of small-scale version of the big off-world arbitration services like the one they were here to plunder. For the kind of things they were here for, these banks were a veritable gold-mine.

“This is Shrike 1 to Command, come in Command,” the earnest voice that crackled through Hockslock’s ear piece belonged to Rudy, one of his snipers. He had been sent ahead to recon the bank.

“Go ahead, Rudy,” Hockslock waved the rest of the gang to a stop, and he and his men moved to cover in the nearby empty storefronts.

“Command,” Rudy continued, desperately trying to ignore the informality, “Tin men have set up base in target location. I count 7, confirmed one man-portable missile launcher present.”

“Nice work, Rudy. Find a vantage point up behind them and wait for us.”

“*Commander,*” Rudy stressed, almost whining now. “Shrike 1 requests operational security on this channel.”

“It’s an encrypted line, you dork,” Hockslock shot back. “And even if they break the encryption, all they’ll get is a dummy automated public broadcast of *Everybody Loves Ra’zlock*. Relax.”

“I’ll relax when we’re rich and a parsec away. Stand by for surveillance photo. Shrike 1 out.”

Hockslock unclipped his tacslab and gestured for the team to fall into the abandoned Yn’dij bodega he’d sheltered in. The air was rancid with spoiled ingredients barely masked by the exotic spices the furry creatures used to season their food, but the padded furniture was unusually luxurious. Grushnak and Btoomba, unable to easily take off their Ripper suits, crouched down next to the window booth the rest of the gang crowded around.

When everyone was ready Hockslock tapped the screen with a stylus, activating the holographic display Rudy had sent them.

“The Enforcers are holed up here, in this fortified bank, with hopefully vast amounts of money that’s just sitting there looking for a good home. Anyone notice anything odd about it?”

Grushnak spoke up. “It’s a colossal waste of time and we should

skip it and head straight to the payday?"

"No," Hockslock said. Grushnak had been grousing the whole mission. Hockslock didn't care if it was over the bet or if Grushnak was worried about catching the Plague, it was bad for morale. "It's right in our path and we can't avoid it for one reason. Anyone else?"

"It overlooks the plaza, sir," Gweeny, one of the young pups said, earnestly. "Uninterrupted fire lanes on every approach."

"Exactly. If we wanted to skirt around it, we're looking at a four or five hour detour to not get blown to bits." Hockslock scratched the side of his nose with the stylus.

"I say we knock on the front door," Btoomba said, hefting his autocannon. "If you've got to say it, say it with bullets."

"That's... just dumb enough to work," Grushnak cut in. "If we send Rudy and Hurlukka around the back with the flamethrower while Btoomba's making himself a target..."

Hockslock nodded. "All right, Heroes, here's what we do..."

***

Of course, it didn't go quite according to plan.

Btoomba was a champ, of course – playing the role of a trigger-happy muscle-head perfectly – of course the fact that he was a trigger-happy muscle-head helped immensely – and his hail of fire was enough to keep the Enforcers in the bank pinned.

He'd counted on Hurlukka not making it, but it was a calculated risk – if he'd managed to somehow get inside and spread some fire around, great, but as it was he had to make a show of trying to sneak around the back. But not *too* sneaky – all the better to seem stupider than he was, and frankly, no-one was going to mind getting his extra share of the spoils.

"Shrike One to Command," Rudy's voice said faintly in Hockslock's

ear, “I'm hit, Command, please advise.”

“How bad, Rudy?” Rudy being hit was not part of the plan, though. He had one of the few guns they had capable of piercing the Enforcer's armor, and losing him would be costly.

“Lot of blood, Sir,” Rudy managed through gritted teeth. “Head wound. Can't tell if it's a graze, or-”

“Stay down, soldier,” Hockslock said. “Grushnak and the boys should be flanking their position, should take the heat off of you.”

“Affirmative. Shrike One out.”

Hockslock glanced at his tac-slab. The transponder on Grushnak's Ripper Suit showed that they were in position. Time to feint.

“We know you are in the money-house, shiny humans!” Hockslock yelled out as Btoomba cut the barrage. “We like moneys! You give us moneys, you live, yes? Easy-peasy!

“Laying it on a bit thick, huh, boss?” Btoomba muttered over the comms. Hockslock waved his hand dismissively in his direction.

“How do we know you'll let us live, Orx?” the Enforcers replied, using a built-in loudhailer. The enemy leader sounded calm, almost as if having a metric crudload of shells fired at him was as annoying as a light drizzle. Bravado, or confidence? Probably the latter.

“You wound me, shiny person! Commander Hockslock is famous for his trustworthiness!”

He paused, hoping that his reputation had preceded him. There was no reply.

“Thirty minutes, shiny humans, then we come and take the moneys!”

Grushnak's icon was flashing on the tac-slab, signaling readiness. At his signal, Grushnak's team would detonate the demolition charges on the wall, and Grushnak and five Commandos would storm the

building at the same time as Hockslock's squad. Hopefully the Enforcers wouldn't be able to bring their missile launcher to bear in close quarters, and Grushnak's close-quarter weaponry would be more than a match for the Enforcer's armor. Not the most elegant plan, but needs must when the mawbeast bites…

Btoomba signaled 'ready'. Rudy was still non-responsive, which meant that the two on the roof were free to return fire. Damn it, the frontal assault squad would have to stay back and -

“Okay, Orx!” the Enforcer leader yelled back. “We'll take the deal. My Corporal here says you're a man of your word, and you wouldn't want to disappoint a fan now, would you?”

“Are you sure?” Hockslock was stunned. He honestly hadn't even considered that they'd take the deal. He started rambling, trying to buy time. “We can, you know, shoot it out, you could escape dramatically, swear eternal vengeance on each other...”

“That's OK, we're not really interested in this bank anyway. You can take the cash, whatever. None of our frajing business.”

This smelled like a trick. And yet…

“If your corporal is a fan,” he said, “they would know I have not the sense of humor, yes? About these things? If this is a trick-”

“No, really. Look, we're coming out the front now.”

Damn and blast.

The front door opened, and one of the Enforcers stepped out. His charge glove was powered down, and he dangled his pistol from his trigger finger.

Hockslock opened a channel to Grushnak. “Send the boys in the back door. Make sure they all leave, but stay out of sight. I don't trust this for a second.”

He cut the channel before Grushnak could reply. No answer from Rudy, dammit.

Two more Enforcer soldiers came out of the bank, holding their weapons in as non-threatening a way as they could manage. The two from the roof even used their jump jets to give up the high ground and land on the sidewalk.

“See, Orx?” said the one with the charge glove. “Nothing to laugh about.”

“I am so glad to see you are a man of honor,” Hockslock called back, clipping his tac-slab to his belt and fingering his gun. His earpiece crackled to life.

“Boss, Tarkug here.” Tarkug was one of the new hires for this job. Dependable. Cleaned his nails with a hrunka knife. “Bank's empty. There's just a whole pile of silver bullion here, unstamped. Even got a duffel bag on the top, half-filled, like someone abandoned it.”

Hockslock felt the gnawing fear in his belly shoot through his body. “DON'T TOUCH THAT B-”

The rear of the bank exploded in a ball of fire. The Enforcers, expecting this, broke into a sprint for cover. Btoomba opened up with everything he had, autocannons and rockets chasing after them as they ran. Hockslock and the three troops he had with him opened fire as well, Hockslock pointing after them, ordering his boys forward.

They'd hardly cleared the ruined storefront they were in when a grenade went off at their feet – riot foam. Hockslock was able to look up and see another Enforcer disengage his cloaking field, fire off a single round into one of his boy's head, and then jet away down the street. Hockslock yelled at Btoomba to look out, but Btoomba couldn't hear him over his own gunfire, and the Enforcer was able to come up behind him unseen and slash at some exposed cables with his wristblade. He didn't stop to press the advantage, following his companions away down the street – Btoomba's ammo feed jammed or something, because the Ripper Suit's guns were suddenly silent, and the suit's legs started twitching spasmodically.

This was easily the most embarrassing day of Hockslock's life.

“Boss, it's Grushnak,” Hockslock heard on the comm. “It's a frajing mess here. My squad is dead. The loot is slag. I think they must've used Hurlukka's fuel tank and modified one of the missiles into a makeshift bomb. Orders?”

Hockslock sighed. He knew that Grushnak was never going to let him live this one down.

“Find Rudy and patch him up. Get me and the men out of this crap. If there are Enforcers here, they must be after the ledger as well. We find it, we find them, and then we frajing kill them.”

***

The sun was warm on her back, and the distant laughter of children mingled with the gentle sound of the waves rolling in.

She had, with the help of her sister, spent most of that summer morning constructing an elaborate castle from the damp sand. Not content simply to fill a bucket and tip it upside down, they had sculpted high walls and carved out crenellations, and embedded fragile shells to serve as windows. Two outer walls surrounded a courtyard dominated by a large keep with intricate spiral patterns carved into it’s walls with sticks, seaweed draped like bunting and stones of many colors dotting the high walls. She knew she would never build something so beautiful, so grand again.

And her sister was demolishing it.

“You promised,” she said to her sister, “you *promised.*”

Her sister ignored her and kept digging.

Their mother was some distance away, talking to some strange man she had never seen before. Maybe they had just met. Maybe he was one of a constant stream of her mother’s business friends. Either way, the girls knew that they were never, ever to go to their mother with their problems when she was talking with another adult, for any reason whatsoever, on pain of terrible punishments.

She could feel tears coming on. Her mother laughed and touched the man's arm. She looked back at the ruined castle.

"You *promised* me that you wouldn't lose Cindy if we buried her in the tomb!" she said, stamping her foot. It didn't have quite the same effect it did on the marble floors at home. "This *always* happens when we play *your* games!"

Cindy was her favourite doll. She had been wearing the latest MaltaCorp™ beachwear, a red-and-silver one-piece that wrapped around the doll's waist just like on the runway show she'd seen last week. The one she'd had to beg and beg her mother to give her. Her favouritest thing in all the world.

Her sister, by contrast, insisted that her most precious toy was a wide-brimmed leather hat that their father had given her after one of his frequent, long off-world trips. She had held it in her hands, gazing at it with open-mouthed fascination as he told her of the long dangerous journey he'd undertaken on some frontier world or another, doing a xeno-archaeological survey on a newly settled world. The hat had smelled of shoe polish and store air-freshener, but their father had insisted this was the very hat he had been wearing while escaping a collapsing alien subterranean temple while clasping a precious golden idol to his chest. Her sister had always lapped up these tales, and she was wearing that hat now while they played at toy archaeology.

Only Cindy was nowhere to be found in the sandy tomb where she had been buried.

"I hate you!" she yelled at her sister, and she was surprised by just how much she meant it. "I hate you! You ruin everything! You think you're so smart, but you're just *weird* and no-one likes you and *I hate your guts*!"

***

She could feel that hatred now. Rage coursed through her body like quicksilver and galvanized her every action. Such hatred! A pure thing, so unlike the petty grudges she had held before - her mother, distant, a career lawyer, and an alcoholic; her father, absent and

uninvolved. These feelings, that until now she had nurtured as driving passions seemed, in retrospect, cute. Like a great artist regarding their childhood scribbles, she was a towering triumph of hatred.

The transformation was a gift. An invitation to a world of sensations she could never have imagined.

To know the feeling of holding her lab partner's head in the palm of her hand, his fat pink fists bouncing off of her newly gnarled wrist as she cracked his skull and felt the brains and soft tissues ooze between her fingers – well. It was bliss, this rage, and she would never have enough.

She could feel her many children in a fashion similar to the way she could feel her fingers and toes – kinesthesia, they called it, only these were dozens if not hundreds of phantom limbs she was aware of but could not directly move. She could suggest, she could ask, but her children for the most part had their own ways of responding to her requests. They wanted to please her, though, that she knew. They were good children. They loved her, as she loved them.

She could feel two of them growing closer, could feel them struggling to drag a person between them. She smiled. Her children, bringing a new friend home.

***

"She hit me," the sniveling boy said. "Your sister hit me and she won't say she's sorry."

The crèche was, like the office block that housed her mother's work, a jungle.

By virtue of their parent's high rank in the firm, they were all the children of hyper-competitive, self-confident, narcissistic borderline sociopaths with a gift for manipulation and navigating social networks. Of course, being between eight and twelve years old, they wouldn't realize this until many years later. All they knew was that in the periods between the demanding tutelage provided as a perk to their parents as part of their salary packages, playtime was a

battlefield.

“And what did you do to her to make her hit you?” she replied.

“I just said that the Science Adventure Hour was dumb and for babies,” the boy said, wiping away his snot with his sleeve. He couldn’t be more than a year younger than her sister, who was busy directing the other kids in an elaborate game of xeno-archeology flavored ‘king of the castle’ using the indoor fort as an alien temple. The boy probably didn’t want to be pressed into the role of a hostile alien native, or something.

“You have to make her say she’s sorry,” he continued. “She hit me really hard and it hurt!”

She thought about it for a moment. On the one hand, the kid was pathetic, and often the target of abuse from the other children. Her own standing in the prepubescent pecking order wasn’t much higher, but enough reflected glory from her extroverted sister spilled over onto her to put her solidly in the middle of the pack.

The kid was pathetic, but he could be useful.

“OK,” she said. “But first, you have to make me a promise.”

Wait

The boy looked up at her, confused.

“What sort of promise?”

“An oath,” she replied. “A blood oath, to serve me, and only me.”

This wasn’t-

The boy nodded, solemnly. She took a small clasp-knife from the pocket of her dress, and drew it’s blade down the middle of her palm.

“Drink,” she said, as the boy stared at her in a trance. “Drink the blood, and pledge yourself to me.”

It didn't happen! It didn't happen that way-

The boy stepped forward and grasped her wrist, bringing the cut to his moth. His tongue gingerly touched her palm, before he sealed his lips around the wound and sucked the ruby liquid down this throat.

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She found herself with the Yn'dij's head in her overgrown hands, his jaw clamped between her thumb and forefinger, forcing his mouth open. Before she could stop herself, she vomited a thick congealed clot of blood directly into his waiting throat.

The stranger started convulsing, as much from the horror of the situation as from the infection. She could feel the virus starting to work, multiplying in his bloodstream. It felt much as she imagined a flower would feel as it opened its petals for the first time.
The Yn'dij was coughing and spluttering, his back arched and limbs contorted. She could feel his blood racing through his body, the virus rapidly multiplying and expanding. It wasn't long before the first physical changes began – biceps growing at a rapid rate, the face and chest becoming gaunt as the protein was repackaged elsewhere. The alien's bones were growing, ripping through skin before it scabbed over in a callus thick enough to stop bullets. His tail was already atrophying and would shortly drop off. In an hour, maybe, the transformation from a man to a hulking, towering, almost simian engine of destruction would be complete.

Before he became one of her children.

She turned to the ones who had brought him. She struggled to remember their names, before their connection supplied the information. Brian and Asoka – they had been a dockworker and an accountant, once upon a time. Now they wore battered Beastmaster rifles and Brian had a sharpened wedge of dull iron tied to a stick across his back, while Asoka made do with a meat-hook for a close combat weapon. She'd used it to drag their prisoner to her, and the sharp point still dripped with blood.

“Where did you find him?” she asked.

Brian answered, his voice hoarse from disuse. “Office district,” he said. “There were a group of them, fighting with the ones that failed to change.”

This was worrying. They hadn’t encountered armed resistance for weeks now, and the ones that had rejected the virus were not under her control. She couldn’t stop them from killing potential new recruits. It might be best to take her children on a little field trip.

The Yn’dij was still twisting, screaming, and contorting itself as the changes took over. His fur sloughed away as the flesh grew and muscle surged behind, bony plates rapidly calcifying when they broke the skin and met the air.

What will the virus promise him?

It was a weird thought, and it didn’t feel quite right. It was forgotten almost as soon as she thought it.

***

“I’m telling you sis, this is the find that’s going to put us into the history books.”

Her sister, wearing a shek-eating grin, heaved a wooden crate off of a hover-pallet and directly onto her desk. The crate pinned down the papers she was working on and smashed a fossil sample she’d been sketching into smithereens.

“Really.” She buried the annoyance she was feeling, and crumpled up the half-finished sketch. “History books. As if the Company is ever going to declassify what we do.”

What they did was considered as something of a niche role in the company. NuWorlds LLC was a vertically integrated frontier settling firm, offering settlement solutions to a variety of larger companies. In other words, sometimes a settlement was having trouble attracting colonists, and NuWorlds would be contracted to pad out the numbers. They offered marketing, relocation, and logistical

support on a freelance basis to firms that found themselves having obtained settlement rights to a colony and for whatever reason didn't have the resources, time, or interest to make sure it was self-sustaining in the long term.

Some of the bigger players found there was more profit in securing the settlement licenses and making a 'good faith' show of trying to settle the planet, but found that their expertise lay more in securing the next contract than the follow-through. For a modest margin, NuWorlds stepped in, on a contract basis. Quite often they would manage to turn a low-profit colony into a medium-profit colony, at which point their contract would be scrapped – which is when the generous termination fees in the contract kicked in.

So even in a specialized, niche market, the in-house xeno-archeology unit was thought of as an odd duck, even a boondoggle. Lobbying by concerned citizen groups in the early days of the Galactic Co-Prosperity Sphere had meant that the boilerplate settlement licensing contracts included an assurance that the settlement company would make an effort to preserve important archaeological sites. In practice, there wasn't a lot of oversight to make sure this happened. That being said the sale and trade in alien artifacts was potentially lucrative, so NuWorlds kept a small unit on staff to pick through what they thought would be notable ruins or fossil sites with an eye to selling exotic finds to museums or private collectors.

"This isn't going to be another one of those hideous preserved corpses of yours," she continued. "I kept that damn four-armed mummy in my office for months after we couldn't offload it."

"Aw, Rach," her sister replied. "It made a kickass hat-stand, you've got to admit that."

Is that my name?

"Open the box, Red. I know you're dying to."

Red – *my sister* – tipped her leather hat and thumbed the release button on the crate. The pneumatic arms on the top and sides slid open with a hiss and the preservative gas in the interior of the crate

rolled out from the gaps.

“I’ll never get tired of how cool that looks,” Red said, removing the top part of the crate unit and placing it on the hover-pallet.

“You always watched too many movies.” Rachel – *me* – flipped the visor attached to the headband on her forehead onto her eyes and started flipping through the bandwidths, checking the object for emissions beyond the visible spectrum.

The object was… angular, was probably the best word. It wasn’t symmetrical, or a recognizable geometric shape, like one might expect to find from a sentient-carved sculpture. It appeared to be metallic, and didn’t emit any heat or ultraviolet light. She was reminded of hot toffee dripped into a glass of cold water, contorting into crazy, tangled shapes as it cooled.

It hurt to look at it.

When she switched the visor to check for false-color gamma ray emission, the screen lit up with a cacophony of greens and reds. She quickly flipped the visor up and lunged across the desk for the containment crate’s top half.

“What-“ Red said, stepping back.

“It’s *radioactive* you careless little *slag,*” Rachael said, as she grabbed the containment unit and slammed it back in place on top of the artifact.

“That’s krat, sis,” Red said, fumbling for her field tablet. “I’ve got the readings here. Negative in the whole electro-magnetic band. Look.”

She thrust the tablet into Rachael’s hands. It was an army surplus tac-slab model – Red had a thing about wanting absurdly hard-wearing gear in the field, both for practical and vanity reasons. Rachael scrolled through the readings Red had taken – sure enough, everything was clear. Almost *suspiciously* clear.

“Where did you say you found this?”

Red took off her hat, leaving it on the table, and ran her hands through her long, russet hair. “Some kind of… shrine, I guess, in a cave on the side of a mountain. There are channels carved through the rock, quite narrow, at angles to allow the light of the setting and rising sun at local system midwinter to shine on the alter. The work marks suggesting something like a stone adze used by – judging from the width of the tunnel – something about the size of a five year old human child.

“The carvings in the walls of the cave depict huge figures- there's pictures on the slab- with jagged spikes coming off their silhouettes. I'm thinking they must be gods or demons – or at least that's what I'm going to put in the auction ad copy.”

Rachael brought up the photos showing the cave walls. The drawings were crude, humanoid paintings using carbon dust. If she had to guess it would be charcoal, although on closer examination-

“Are these pictures carved into the rock?” she asked, frowning.

“Good spotting,” Red said. “Carved, then filled in with pigment. If I didn't know better, the tool used for that would be shaped like a talon.”

Rachael shuddered. Something about the carvings gave her the creeps. She gave the tablet back to Red and bent to examine the instrument panel of the transport crate.
“Did you see the altar?” Red asked.

“No, and I'm not sure I care to.” Rachael plugged her own tablet into the interface panel and re-took the electromagnetic spectrum readings. “I never was as bloodthirsty as you are when it comes to these things.”

Red shrugged. “Your loss. I know at least four collectors who're going to be bidding big on this thing – most of the altars you see with the blood channels carved in intricate patterns are fakes, but this is the real deal. You'd be surprised how uncommon ritual sentient sacrifice is on non-Earth planets.”

Rachael was about to respond when her tablet reported the scan results. “That's odd. It's stopped.”

“Huh.” Red leaned over Rachael's shoulder to get a better look. Rachael always hated that. “That's weird. Want me to open her up again?”

“Better not take the chance.” Rachael pushed her sister away and straightened up. “I'm moving this to the isolation lab. Full class-A hazard suits at all times, only myself and Sidney allowed access to it.”

“Fair enough.” Red picked up her hat in two fingers and flipped it onto her head in a move that Rachael had seen her practice for hours in the mirror growing up. “I've got enough else going on, just let me know what you find out so I can catalog it for the bosses. That reminds me – you taken Sidney up on that offer of a date yet?”

“Date? Sidney?” Rachael looked at Red like her sister had invited her to swallow motor oil. “That creep? You've got to be kidding me.”

“Just saying, as a professional cobweb-sweeper, in my considered opinion-”

“Get out!” Rachael threw a pen at Red's retreating head, her sister laughing to herself as she ran out of the room.

***

What a kvhnk, she - *I, me, Rachael-* thought. *Just because I wasn't flirting my way up the ladder like* somebody *I could mention.*

The spike of spite she felt was enough to make her forget just why it was so uncomfortable to remember her name. She relished the malice, and let it wash through her body.

Her newest child was ready. The main transformation was complete, and she felt the child stretch itself to it's full height for the first time.

“Welcome, my love,” she said to it. “Welcome to your new family.”

The hulking creature purred, and rubbed it's head under her palm.

“How many others?” she asked

“Less than a dozen,” Asoka replied. “Their leader was a female, long coat, ridiculous hat – like she thought she was an action hero or something.”

She felt her entire body tense in a shuddering thrill. It couldn't be, but it *had* to be-

She grabbed Asoka by the front of her torn, dirty shirt and lifted her bodily off the ground.

“Her hair,” she growled. “*What colour was her hair.*”

***

“RACHAEL!”

Rachael couldn't hear her sister properly over the sirens. The orange pulsing light was annoying her, so she reached out and smashed it. Sidney's head was in her hand, still with the ridiculous containment helmet on, the man mewling and begging for his life. She closed her fist, and his brains and soft tissue oozed through her fingers.

Her sister – her hated, show-off, up-herself, know-it-all sister – was on the other side of the containment glass, hammering at it futilely. She looked over at her, snarling.

Red's face – she would always treasure the look of pure, unadulterated fear that she saw on Red's face. She mustn't have realised who she was now, what she had become.

“...Rachael?” Red mouthed. Rachael roared, gripped Sidney's corpse by the legs and the chest and pulled-

***

She dropped Asoka to the ground. She knew. She'd always known it would come to this.

“If my sister has found friends,” she said aloud, as her children drew closer, “Then they may have a ship. They will have a way off this rock – and we will take it from them!”

Her children lifted their weapons into the air, and Rachael smiled.

Dankos Chance

A Dreadball story

by Bill Taylor

3 minutes ago

Danko hit the ground awkwardly, his limbs twisting as he rolled towards the edge of the foundry wall. He eventually came to a halt, and shook his head blindly, the noise of the game continuing but seemingly at a distance. Time seemed to slow down as he lifted his head and surveyed the pitch, unaware of any immediate pain. His vision swam with the images of his teammates running, trying to block a fast-paced rush by the orc team, but it all seemed alien to him.

Danko knew he needed to get to his feet, but couldn't remember why. A man in the distance was looking at him, shouting, mouthing words he couldn't understand and making wild gestures, but he just shook his head again, a shot of pain surging behind his eyes. He tried to stand up, but his arms gave way and he fell to the warm floor. With his cheek resting on the foundry plate, he started to remember…

***

30 minutes ago

The men made their way through the dank corridor in single file, the stench of molten metals and chemicals still hung in the air. The foundry floors could still be heard, even through the meters and meters of solid alloy walls - machines operated by huge men, making gigantic cylinders and metal components for use within the Corporation.

Rumors were rife that the planet foundries were making parts for weapons, huge hull-mounted cannons for deep space exploration vessels, but nobody knew for sure – the Corporation and its many factories made just about everything in existence, it would be impossible for the lowly grunt to know exactly what they were

making. As long as the credits kept coming in to keep a roof over heads, no questions were ever asked. Ethics was not a word known in this system, and certainly wasn't one used by the Corporation.

Every footstep of the marching Dreadball boots echoed throughout the dark chamber, almost like a precise drumbeat. At the end of the tunnel was a small workroom, but in this case it had been converted into a makeshift coaching area. The noise of animal breath and grunting could be heard from the room, and as the men entered one by one, each one took a double take at the creatures at the other side – huge humanoid beasts with a dark green skin and built with so much sinew and muscle that it seemed to be straining their Dreadball uniforms to the maximum. Their heavy brows contained a deadly set of red eyes that seemed to view each of the men not as an opponent, but as prey.

The beasts sneered, revealing a set of huge discolored fangs, capable of ripping through meat with ease. Danko gazed across the orks – he had seen their like before on holo screens. They were fierce creatures to fight in the many skirmishes the Corporation had with them on numerous worlds, savage and brutal with their attacks, but were also formidable opponents on the numerous Dreadball pitches throughout the quadrant. It was not uncommon for there to be many casualties or even deaths in games when Orc teams were present.

One of the orc players seemed to stand out in Danko's survey – it was marginally larger than the rest of the squad, but had a huge set of incisor teeth sticking out from its mouth like a set of ill-fitting stalagmites in a wet cave. Danko knew this was the guard of the team - unable to pick the Dreadball up during the game, but able to stop the opposing team from doing the same. The huge orc met Danko's eyes and just grunted – Danko didn't break the gaze but sensed there was nothing but anger and carnage behind those cold red eyeballs. I think I'll call you "Snarl", thought Danko.

"You guys are mighty lucky today." boomed Coach Modesto to the men. "You have been given an opportunity not many people get around these parts; a chance for the best to gain a scholarship with the Calipso Cardinals." A hush fell over the men in the room as the news sunk in. As a small Dreadball team that played in the Foundry League, this was certainly an amazing opportunity. Even a

scholarship was a chance at the big time and to gain the kind of money and stardom that people could only dream about. This was life-changing for that one special person, and Danko was sure it was going to be him.

“We have the honor and privilege of having a scout from the Cardinals with us. I want you fellas to give the utmost respect to Miss DaCosta.” The men watched as a tall, beautiful woman emerged from behind the orc team, seemingly appearing from the shadows behind. She had long, flame-red hair, a slim physique, and eyes that were as blue as any ocean, and just as deadly.

The noises of the distant furnaces were now joined by the tip-tapping of her high-heel shoes as she slinked towards the coach with an out held hand and a smile. “Thank you very much for that introduction, Coach Modesto,” purred DaCosta, taking the coaches hand firmly before standing upright. “The nature of my job is to seek new players for all the different teams within the Cardinals franchise. I scour the quadrant for people with not just a skill for playing Dreadball, put a passion; a passion to help deliver the game to the millions and millions of fans throughout dozens of systems; to help these fans understand the game and the dynamics of the sport; and ultimately, to purchase Cardinals merchandise.”

A few of the human players gave out a small laugh. DaCosta did not think anything she said was funny. “The simple truth is that I’m here to ensure that, no matter how the sport evolves, or how many players play, that the Corporation keeps making money; and more importantly, sees a profit.” DaCosta paraded in front of the orc team. “With me, I have brought the Southland Savages – a team of orc players owned by the Corporation – to see if this team, or better still, any of YOU, are anywhere near good enough for the ‘proper’ leagues.” DaCosta air quoted where appropriate, which Danko knew was a dig at his team.

The Foundry league in which he participated was not considered a ‘proper’ Dreadball league, not by any stretch of the imagination. It was a small-time league developed out of necessity to keep the systems entertained. Because the system was made up of foundry workers and their families all on small incomes, entertainment was necessary to keep the people subservient to the Corporation’s agenda. The Foundry league, for example, was made up primarily

of foundry workers who had spare time on their hands and a need to earn a small credit or two on the side. All of the games were played within a shut-down foundry on a make-shift pitch.

The small league players never went anywhere, playing the game until they got severely injured or were just too old for it, but for all it was a means to earn some much-needed credits. The Corporation was always seeking ways to make efficiency savings, investing in robotics and artificial intelligences, and the human settlement on this particular foundry planet had already made many sacrifices in order to survive. The workforce could not afford to be out of work as they would immediately lose their Corporation-owned homes, with little or no chance of other employment other than turning to crime, or worse still, enlisting in the meat grinder that was the military.

Technology had advanced so far for humanity, but unless you were one of the elite, prosperity was very rarely on the cards. Chances like this did not happen very often.

“Of course, the Savages are just as their name suggests, so I will take this opportunity to let any of you walk away from this right now, no questions asked, and you will be able to continue playing in your league as normal, knowing that you missed the one chance you had to try to make a better life for yourself and your family.”

DaCosta’s words hit like stones. Danko knew this was his time, his moment to shine, and he was going to take it. A few of the players made their excuses and left the room like scolded children. A few of the orc players gave out what seemed to be a laugh. DaCosta smiled and examined her fingernails as the last man left the room, ignoring him as if he was a passing insect. Wusses, thought Danko. He wasn’t going to give up this chance for anyone.

As he clenched and unclenched his huge fists, he caught the gaze of another player. Falco looked at Danko and gave a wry smile. Falco was tall and lean with blond hair that was cut into a long Mohican style. Danko knew that he had the same desire, but there was only one scholarship.

It was going to be an interesting game.

***

Now

Danko felt the cold water splash onto his skin, and it felt invigorating. He wiped his face with his left hand as Coach Modesto replaced the Dreadball catcher on his right as the previous one had been damaged during Danko's knockdown. Danko watched the game in progress – both teams had yet to score and the human team was running circles around the orc players, but anytime a human got close to an orc they usually got viciously hit or violently pushed to the ground.

In these smaller Dreadball games, there were no such things as Ref-bots or Eyes-in-the-sky, which was normally fine – there was usually a gentleman's agreement between coaches to keep fouls to a minimum – in this game, there was no such agreement. Any severe wounds and fatalities would be erased as if they didn't happen. It was obvious why DaCosta allowed players the choice to play or not – this was part of the test: if you could play well during a no holds barred game, you would excel during a properly regulated game.

He hated sitting on the side-lines of a game. He glanced at Snarl, the orc with the massive teeth – a leader or warlord if it were on its homeworld due to its size and stature. That's the bastard that knocked me down, thought Danko. He glanced upwards at the viewing gallery – he could see DaCosta watching the game and smiling whenever one of the orcs performs a dirty tackle, which was quite often. She looked at Danko, and then turned her attention to the current player holding the ball, making a dash for the scoring zone.

It was Falco. He was running at full speed with two orc jacks running towards him, attempting to block his way. As a well-rounded striker, Falco knew he had to outmaneuver these two beasts if he wanted to score. He ran right towards them, gaining a bit of momentum as he did, then at the last second, sidestepped to the right, confusing the orcs who ran into each other. Falco regained his balance quickly and knew he had to take a shot. A two point shot would be difficult at this angle and speed, so he decided to punt for a three pointer. He heard the thumping footsteps of another orc jack behind him, so he knew he only had seconds at best to line up the shot.

He pulled his arm back and then fired the heavy Dreadball towards its target. Falco saw a green arm come at him out of his peripheral vision, but it was too late. The ball travelled towards the strike zone and hit its desired point. Falco and the orc tumbled to the ground as the siren signaled a score for the human team. “Better luck next time!” said Falco to the orc as he flipped himself to his feet and held out his hand as a gesture to the orc to lift himself up with. The orc did not see the sportsmanship.

Danko cursed under his breath. He watched as Falco performed a small celebratory dance as the countdown for the next ball went from 3 to 1. He looked up at DaCosta who was clearly impressed. Danko knew he had to get onto the Dreadball pitch fast if he was to have any chance in getting the scholarship. He hated that he was thinking it, but he knew his only chance to get back onto the pitch was if another player got seriously injured. He knew all of these guys, some of them grew up together, and now his head was full of guilt.

The Dreadball fired out of the side of the foundry wall like a cannonball, and human and orc jacks alike scrambled to receive it. The object itself was made of solid metal, and would do serious damage if it hit against a player’s body. There were no weapons allowed in the sport of Dreadball, but it was not surprising if the ball itself was used on some unsuspecting player who turned his or her back for a second too long.

The score was +3 to the humans, but that wasn’t much of a consolation as most of the human players had suffered minor injuries such as scratches, bruises and cuts. This was about to change.

An orc jack and a human jack raced to grab the ball which was travelling at a great velocity. The orc lashed out at the human, who returned the abuse by administering a shoulder charge of his own, knocking the brute down. The player grabbed the ball, and turned around to scan for team-mates. The orc that he knocked down was back to his feet and angry, running at him like a bull at a red rag.

The man had time to fire the ball towards a waiting striker in the distance before the full force of the orc hit him in the chest, sending

him against the foundry metal wall. The man clutched at his chest and coughed up blood, but that didn't stop the orc. The orc let out a bellow as he brought fist after fist down onto the man's head, driving him to the ground. Blow after blow struck the poor man who had no means of protest as he had been taken completely by surprise.

Cracks began to appear in his safety helmet, normally made from very strong plasti-steel, but in this case it may as well have been made out of cardboard. The man convulsed as the orc's vicious attack ground to a halt, although play had not. A human striker had caught the man's pass, but had been distracted by the attack on his comrade. He stopped running towards the strike zones and started to walk towards the man. Several other players had began to make their way to the area out of respect to their fallen player, but the orcs had no such instinct.

The biggest orc, Snarl, bounded towards the player with the ball and with an open hand, slammed the player in the back, sending him sailing through mid-air for a few seconds before landing onto the metal ground on his side, the Dreadball released and in play again. Some of the smaller orcs scrimmaged between themselves for the ball, before scurrying towards their own strike zones. Snarl looked at the humans and gave a wry smile, causing a stream of thick drool to leak from his mouth. Snarl didn't care.

The human players including the coach started to shout towards the viewing gallery in protest at what had just occurred. The orcs scored a four pointer due to there being no human defense at the furthest strike zone, which made the protests even grander. DaCosta sighed and moved towards a microphone, no emotion or sympathy on her perfect face. A speaker crackled into life as her silky voice echoed in the chamber.

"Play does not stop for anything." The men looked at each other in disbelief as the countdown for the next Dreadball to be fired onto the pitch began. The coach shrugged his shoulders as the men ran back onto the pitch into their positions. The coach lifted the arm of the dead player and dragged his body off the pitch, leaving a trail of dark blood, clear liquid and cranial matter which emanated from the player's head in small spurts.

There were now only five human players on the pitch. Danko knew there had to be six in order for the humans to have a chance at winning. He stood up and shouted to the coach, who was wiping the blood off his hands.

“Coach, get me back in the game!”

The coach looked at the scoreboard. The humans were losing to the orcs who had a score of +1 now. There was only minutes of the game left, and Danko knew he had to take a chance. The coach nodded his head. “Get out there and play for your life!” shouted the coach. Danko clenched his fists and ran onto the pitch with a renewed fervor.

The orcs were performing a rush to score with Snarl doing his Guard job well and spearheading the assault. One of the orc jacks seemed to giggle hysterically as he held the Dreadball in his clawed hands, running behind the mighty beast who was pushing human after human out of the way with ease. The orc had time for a small chitter as Danko’s mighty frame dived onto him, Snarl oblivious to the onslaught that was occurring behind him.

Danko smacked the orc around the head a few times with the back of his right arm, hitting him in the face with a few blows of the new catcher on his outer forearm. The orc began to bleed green ooze from cuts on his face, but his smile didn’t deteriorate. Danko tried to free the ball, but the creature wouldn’t release his grip. Falco appeared from the flank to see if he could assist – although they were rivals, Danko and Falco knew they had to win this game in order to be even considered for the scholarship.

Falco started to punch the orc in the face, but still it held steadfast. Danko could see in the distance that Snarl had realized he was alone in the orc strike zone, and gave out a huge shout filled with rage. He started to gallop towards his fallen teammate as the other orcs were being held at bay by the remaining human players, brawling and attacking each other as if it were a bar fight. It seemed that the humans had quickly learned to adapt to a game without rules. Danko, using his initiative, brought his head close to the orc’s neck and sunk his teeth into its throat, causing the orc to scream, which was a new sound for this pitch. The scream quickly turned to a gurgle as the creature’s mouth filled with thick green

foam, allowing Falco to wrench the ball free.

The orc stopped moving and started to twitch. “Give me the ball!” shouted Danko to Falco, who was eyeing up the opponent’s strike zone. Falco looked at the scoreboard – there were 30 seconds to spare. “For our fallen teammate!” urged Danko. Falco nodded to Danko and handed him the ball. Danko stood quickly and ran towards a rampaging Snarl, who was almost on top of them. Danko fired the ball at the beast, hitting it square between the eyes, causing it to shake its massive head in a daze and stop running. In a strange stroke of luck, the ball bounced off Snarl’s cranial ridge and landed right into Danko’s hands.

Danko, with both his hands gripped firmly on the metal ball, hoisted it upwards towards the creature’s jaw at high speed. The ball connected, cracking the two huge teeth as the upper jaw hit the lower. Danko did not relent in his attack. He struck the monster with thump after thump, the orc first falling to its knees, then slumping onto its hands. Danko started to beat the creature around the face, sending shards of teeth and globs of flesh skywards with every devastating blow. Danko looked up at the viewing gallery, where he could see DaCosta glaring at him, as if he had caused her a serious grievance, but Danko didn’t care. He was showing her what he thought of her “champion”. As the body of Snarl fell to the ground in a mess of green gore and red meat, Danko picked up the largest tooth and pointed it towards the strike zone before tossing it aside.

Danko began to jog towards the strike zone with the Dreadball cradled in one hand, knowing that he had proved himself on the pitch. He looked at the faces of the men, some of them cheering him forward as he crossed the halfway line. He was joined at his side by Falco, who smiled at him as Danko turned his gaze towards the three point zone. No orc was going to attack him after what they had witnessed, he said to himself with confidence. He then felt a sharp pain race through his stomach, and as he looked down he could see the cracked end of a sharp tooth sticking out from under his Dreadball uniform. He saw blood spurting from the wound before looking up and seeing Falco mouth the word “Sorry” with a wry grin.

Danko held his stomach with his free hand, but his legs started to

buckle. He felt dizzy as Falco grabbed the ball from his weakening hand and turned away in a sprint towards the strike zone. Danko's breathing became shallower as the blood seemed to flow even more freely from his wound. Falco stopped running, and walked back to Danko, pulling the tooth from the wound, causing the blood to free flow onto the pitch. Time seemed to slow down for Danko as he watched the smiling man run towards the strike zone.

Danko fell to his knees and examined his blood-soaked hands just as the klaxon sounded to indicate a four pointer had been scored. He tried to stop the bleeding, but there was no pressure available from his weakening muscles. Blood flowed like a waterfall. Danko's body started to feel cold, and he was aware that the rest of his team-mates were walking away from him. He trembled as his body lay onto the ground, his arms and hands wet with his blood and the strength leaving them to even slow the ichor from leaving his body.

The dull noise of a few players gathering the makeshift strike zones and scoreboard from the foundry could be heard, the usual ritual of the equipment being stowed away, making the foundry bare again. The lights embedded in the walls started to dim, before going out altogether. Danko was cold and alone, bar the bodies of some of the orcs and the one dead human player. Danko could see, as a cruel twist of fate, the viewing gallery from his position. He watched as DaCosta congratulated Falco with a handshake, before she glanced out towards the foundry. He knew she was looking for him, but he was covered by the creeping darkness. He watched with tears in his eyes as the coach started flicking switches and pressing buttons to bring the foundry to life.

Danko could hear the distant hums of machines and smelters burst into life above him. Falco was going to get the life that Danko desired. Danko began to think about his family, and how they would be told about some sort of "industrial accident". She thought of his children and his wife as the oil sprayers activated, coating the furnace wall with a layer of ooze. This was the precursor to molten metals being poured into the foundry room, to cast a perfect cylindrical shape: for what, only the highest within the Corporation knew. Danko let out a weak scream before the first cavern above opened like an iris, spilling red-hot liquid into the room.

The last thing Danko saw before his body melted under the liquid

was of Falco leaving the viewing gallery with DaCosta.

Ultrasonic

by Sebastian Pietrzak

In the dusty gloom of an abandoned tunnel, a three man team of soldiers continued their lazy patrol of the underground corridors below the residual hub. Since nothing here could be regarded as a "tempting target" for saboteurs or vandals, they roamed the corridors at ease, and joked easily. As the soldiers marched on, their shod boots rang out gracelessly upon the steel floor, while their carelessly slung weapons knocked rhythmically against the rest of their kit.

The soldier's overconfidence, which bordered on negligence, caused the soldiers to fail to notice another pair of eyes peering out of the darkness. Crouching motionless, nestled in the comfortable gap between the heating pipes, was a lone Veer-myn. Twitching slightly every time the soldier's boots rang out an unpleasant tone on the metal floor, the Veer-myn waited impatiently for the Humans to leave the area. The Veer-myn had used this route several times by now, and already knew, more or less, the routine. He knew that he wouldn't be seen as he approached the production halls and power stations.

These were Burrus' favorite places to rest and listen. The constant, rhythmic, patter of pistons stamping. The torn, sloppy hiss of steam spouting. That was his kingdom. Concealed between the machinery, he would be hidden from any prying eyes or surveillance systems. Sozzled by the background noise, Burrus would sleep like a pup.

As Burrus approached one of his favorite resting places, he noticed that something was not right. The Humans were everywhere. Several technicians were attending mechanisms, and they were clearly agitated. Leaders of the Human herd were shouting orders with shrill voices, often shaking with excitement. Or was it fear? Burrus did not understand the unpleasant Human language well, but his limited knowledge was enough to deduce some meaning. The Humans had been attacked on the surface, and were trying to prepare some sort of defense here.

Remembering the orders of the Brood Mother, Burrus guessed it was Lugens' pack that had assailed the Human outpost. Knowing their biochem inclinations, Burrus smiled. Veer-men employed night raids, preceded by a heavy barrage, to keep the Humans occupied in an inefficient exchange of fire. All the while, the real threat crossed the no man's land, and sprayed enemy positions with caustic liquids. These chemicals reacted with oxygen while still airborne, and would instantly melt everything they touched. Metal would fizzle and collapse upon itself. Exposed skin would quickly condense and evaporate with a sough. Unfortunate victims usually looked quietly in disbelief for a few seconds, before uttering a cry of unbelievable pain. The cry would soon die out, along with its owner.

Looking at the commotion, Burrus was not so sure about the outcome of the battle above the ground. The Humans were not running amok. They had their respective duties and orders, and were clearly trying to prepare something. Deciding to listen to his intuition, Burrus did not leave the area in search of a more desolate place to rest. Instead, he stayed to listen.

Burrus found a more comfortable position, pricked up his ears, and watched the commotion near one of the heating pumps.

Human technicians began to roll out bundles of cables, and attached them to one of the large devices. As soon as the coupling was completed, they began to flip switches, adjust valves, and pull levers. All of these seemingly random actions brought the machine to life. Burrus was drowned in a wave of sounds, as the area came alive.

Pumps began gurgling as if pumping water. Giant fans began their thumping rotation slowly, only to speed up, and suck heat from some canal below. Dust particles and small pebbles began a quick ascent, swirling, whizzing, and tapping on metal rotors as they travelled all the way up. Somewhere inside the machine, coiled inductors, each length of fully grown rat man, began to collect heat, quickly becoming red-hot and sizzling sharply. Finally, the machine revealed its purpose. All of these primal forces were harnessed and transformed into raw energy, which began a journey

through the cables to an unknown destination above the ground.

To Burrus' sensitive ears, all of these sounds combined to create an irresistible music. Unconsciously reacting to the rhythm, the unseen Veer-myn began to wag his tail. Soon, Burrus had begun to tap his claws on closest surface, matching the subtle rhythm of the machine orchestra.

Suddenly, all of the lights in the room dimmed, almost to the point of fading. The machinery began to transfer energy to its unseen destination at neck breaking speed, and the subtle hum changed into a mad howl. Even through the tens of meters of material that separated him from the surface, Burrus was able to hear an unbelievable roar of energy. After a few seconds, the phenomena stopped, along with the machinery.

The Humans began to move again. Some of them had grabbed fire extinguishers, and were trying to cool down parts of the cabling. It had become red-hot, and was on the verge of melting. Anticipating the end of the show, Burrus withdrew deeper into the shadows. Before he retreated to make plans for his pack, Burrus cast one last hungry look at the amazing device.

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"Mr. Tarczynsky, if you please, spare me a moment?" The hoarse voice of Space Port commander Adam Kovalsky halted the Comms Specialist in place.

"I know I gave you a free hand regarding the analysis of rat's behavior, but I would like for you to provide me with some more details on what you already know, and what your suspicions are."

"Of course, sir. As you know, over the course of the last 7 days, we have encountered 24 acts of hostility of some kind. At least 7 of them were theft or vandalism caused by Veer-myn, which was confirmed by surveillance. There were also 4 direct attacks on our facilities. These actions were also confirmed as Veer-myn attacks. However, this information is not really the interesting part," the Comms Specialist reported. *"I mean, of course, these actions are serious, and we need to react. But, there is other footage of rather peculiar rat behavior. These*

incidents cannot be directly linked to the hostilities that we talked about in today's briefing. However, I think that I'm starting to see a pattern."

"That's pretty vague. Can you give me something more concrete?" Kovalsky asked.

"Right away. Yesterday's attack on Production Hall PH 7 seemed very inefficient and ill-planned. The enemy's barrage was highly inaccurate, until one of the rats opened the light control box, and modified something inside. After that, the lights in the hall went dark, and then switched back to life in ultraviolet mode, until the fluorescents above our positions were overloaded, and exploded.

Once turned to ultraviolet, the rat's barrage became much more accurate. You could say almost sniper like, if you consider their usual efficiency."

"Yes, I remember this in the report. There is something mysterious to it, you're right." Kovalsky replied.

"*What's more, is that I've seen a few times where lone Veer-myn were standing in seemingly random corridors. They were doing nothing at all, or so it seemed. I would like to focus on such occurrences, to see if they might have any correlation to other cases. I've seen at least one such session of "doing nothing" take place near a facility that was attacked not long after,"* the Comms Specialist said.

"Well, I'm no xenobiologist, but the rat looked rather agitated when it disappeared into that maintenance shaft at the end," Kovalsky stated. He exhaled deeply before speaking again. *"Well, it's a mystery... but, in my experience, if you have a hunch, it's worth pursuing. Alright, crack on. I expect a report in 6 hours. Dismissed."*

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Soldiers were moving swiftly and silently through the underground corridors. Underslung flashlights on their weapons constantly swept the pathway in front of them, behind, above, and on the sides where entrances to the maintenance shafts might be. They knew the enemy they might encounter: the stealthy and dexterous rat men were well known for their ambush tactics, often utilizing narrow

pathways usually overlooked by humans.

Surveillance cameras had detected Veer-myn activity in this underground facility earlier. This squad was dispatched to intercept one of these groups and eradicate the vermin, to give a clear sign for others to stay away.

Once near the target location, the soldiers turned off their flashlights and gathered in a defensive formation, taking preassigned positions and scanning the area. It was a huge warehouse, crammed with tall containers, water and fuel reservoirs, and stacked crates. Observation of the whole room was out of the question – it was a true maze. Once fully operational, all menial work here was done by mechanical servitors using magnetic chips on containers as signposts. For now, however, the warehouse was not in use, and its robotic denizens sat on the outskirts of the maze, gathering dust.

The troopers scanned the area for immediate threats. Not spotting any Veer-myn outside of the maze, they soon realized they would have to venture inside to get them. Not wanting to break the silence and notify the enemy about their presence here, the lieutenant gave the orders in sign language. Everyone in the squad checked their weapons, ammo, and combat knifes. One of them, the one carrying a flamethrower, was surrounded by his squad mates. In narrow confines of the maze that awaited them and against such swarming enemies, a roaring cone of fire was the most effective weapon they had at their disposal. He clicked something on the weapon, and a small flame ignited below the barrel. Another trooper, the strongest of the group, was carrying a heavy burst laser which he removed from his back and mounted on a tripod with a quiet click. Then he attached a portable energy cell to it, which began to hum softly as it transferred energy to the weapon. Finally, he turned on the proximity warning systems, sat heavily on the ground, and focused on covering his squad on the move.

The soldiers arrived at the entrance to the labyrinth, and without pause they ventured inside. Finally, they reached the first turn and disappeared from the sight of their colleague with the heavy weapon.

Inside, the squad began crawling through the endless turns. Every time they reached the crossroad or a split, the lieutenant would consult the plans he had on the HUD display of his tactical helmet, and would choose the way forward; their assumption was the Veermyn were gathering at the heart of the labyrinth, so he followed the course leading them ever closer.

Suddenly the point man raised his clenched fist, immediately halting the entire team. The silence hung in the air for a long minute, and the lieutenant was about to give the order to move out again, when they all heard something. A jarring sound of metal scratching metal. It felt as if someone was pulling something on metal floor tiles. However, the sound was weak and the acoustic properties of the maze made it impossible to assess from where the sound was coming or how far away the source was. The forward soldier looked at the officer while pointing the way he guessed the sound was coming from; the lieutenant nodded with approval and the unit took off.

Soldiers began slowly following along the labyrinth towards the beckoning sound. Once again, the column stopped. They all heard it without the signal from the point man: in the distance, they could hear intermittent whirring sounds, as if someone was playing with the driller – turning it on and off. However, the sound was coming from different direction than the scratching.

As the lieutenant didn't want to split the group, he ordered the team to resume marching towards the original target. After a while he requested a report from the rear guard.

It never arrived.

He ordered the group to halt again. Seconds later, they realized one of them was missing. The rear guard was absent and was not responding on team's radio frequency. As a check-up, commander contacted the heavy gun sentry – he was still there, reporting no enemy activity.

Now suddenly tense, the soldiers moved out towards their initial goal yet again, even more cautiously this time. They had just lost a man with no-one noticing. Not a single sound was made when one

of them was abducted. Only a scratching noise in the distance and jerky sounds of drills coming from…

The soldiers suddenly realized the sounds were now coming from multiple directions and distances – some getting closer with each passing second. Even more drillers could be heard every few seconds, every time distorted by acoustics of the maze they were in. They couldn't tell exactly which corridor led to which whizzing sounds, which alley led to which scratching sounds, sounds of claws scrawling an ominous message for them.

The feeling of being surrounded overtook the whole squad. They instinctively took the defensive positions in a circle to cover all possible lanes of attack. Sounds of their steel-clad boots, rustling of their uniforms and clicking of weapons being reloaded – they all were drowned out by the maddening sounds of dozens of drills coming from all around them.

Suddenly all was quiet. Every noise disappeared, every drill stopped its furious rotation. The silence was so sudden and deep, they could hear their frightened hearts beating and blood pulsing through their veins. Cold sweat doused them, hands began to shake, and chapped lips yearned for a nervous lick.

Without warning they were assailed by the cacophony of howls, squeaks, and roars of the drills. All around them Veer-myn emerged from the shadows, hideouts in crates and concealed maintenance shafts. A few even jumped from the tall stacks of containers in almost suicide attack.

The vermin tide crushed in on them from all directions. Only veteran instincts and training allowed them to react quickly enough to use their weapons. Laser rifles hummed and shrilled when firing energy lances into the living tide of fur. A few rats were hit and their burning pelage fizzled under the extreme heat of laser beams; the creatures howled with pain and anger but did not stop their charge.

Their commander had enough time to contact their rear guard and shout a warning. Before he received a reply, the soldiers overrun, and all they could hear were the roaring melodies of weaponized

mining drills.

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The two GCPS technicians murmured in wonder at the latest revelation their investigation had produced.

- Alright James, I know this is quite a shock to know these rats are so obsessed with visual effects during battle, but we still have some time before reporting to commander Kovalsky. I still have a few more footages ready to analyze. Load them and display on screens 3 to 7.

The operator sitting behind the console keyed in a series of commands and brought up the screens. The flat panel flickered and showed different locations in underground facilities below the port. One of the standing technicians began to watch all of them, looking for something significant on which he could focus and perhaps link to one of the recent Veer-myn attacks. Different lonely rat figures were shown on all five screens. Sometimes they were sauntering slowly, only to stop at random location, stand still for a moments and began walking anew. Another came to a certain location and stood there for a long time, twisting its head from side to side as if thinking intensively. This recording caught Marek's attention.

- Bring up recording 6 to the main screen. Enhance image.

- Can't promise anything. This particular camera is low resolution.

The operator input a program for the machine to work on the video file. After few long minutes the processing was finished and they watched the recording again – in better quality this time. The lone rat was still there, standing and waggling. This time, however, they both saw something more – the rat man was stamping his foot delicately. Every time he cocked his head, his foot paused for a moment and began its tapping again, with different pace each time.

- This corridor; it's close to some active production hall or something similar with laud machinery?

– Hmm, there's a boiler room nearby. No any conveyor belts there, but there are some pumps, crushers, and automated feeders.

- Do we have a recording from this room? We need sound this time; video is less important.

The technician began searching in the system and found the requested footage from a very low resolution camera – but with sound. He guessed what Tarczynsky had in mind and played both recordings at the same time, matching recording time, so they were displaying the exact same second.

Both technicians began to raise their brows once they realized what they were watching. The listening rat was wagging to the rhythm of heating pumps, his clawed foot was tapping the floor with frequency matching the grating sound of an automated feeders, while his head changed its position every time the crusher pounded its cargo and crumbled it to dust. After few such cycles he shook himself like a dog and fled hotfoot into the darkness, disappearing from sight.

- Remind me, when was this recorded?

– Four hours ago.

– We don't have much time. We need to plan something nasty for them when they assault the room. Contact Commander Kovalsky. We need to hasten our meeting.

***

Burrus and his fellow Maligni crouched in the maintenance tunnel and listened muffled sounds coming from around the corner. The zig-zag pattern of the shaft and the distance from the target room attenuated the hypnotizing noises and occasional human voices. Despite this, the Veer-myn did not dare to venture further in order to avoid alerting the humans' security devices they had surely loaded the boiler room with.

The well-known mixture of sounds coming from the machines in the area, which was the reason they planned this and other attacks, was enriched with additional tones. Very pleasant to the ear. Harmonious. Not veiling the original sounds, but rather

emphasizing their qualities. At first, their reaction was spontaneous excitement and eagerness to commit to the attack at once. But after this came the realization about the increased human presence in proximity to the boiler room. This rang a warning tone in Burrus' mind. He ordered his pack to suspend the attack and scout the area without the enemy noticing their presence.

As he suspected, the room was heavily guarded. Even though the soldiers were doing their best to conceal their positions, their clumsiness had given them away. Rustling of their uniforms, scraping of their clad boots, and soft humming of the energy sources of their emplaced weapons – all of this told the stalking rats the estimated quantity and quality of the enemy force.

Thanks to this intel, Burrus knew it was a trap. His pack was experienced with such tactics; they often used them against the troopers guarding some valuable equipment, munitions or pleasantly growling devices. The GCPS equivalent of Maligni must have done a great job in analyzing his pack: it seemed they had deployed emitters, enriching the sound of the room in order to lure them inside without any recon. They might have discovered their sound inclinations, but they have yet to understand their race was not a horde of barbarian rodents without lateral thinking. At least, not all of them.

Burrus bared his teeth with contempt when the lights in the room suddenly went out. His brother's pack had answered his call.

Would-be ambushers guessed something went horribly wrong with their ambush and turned on their underslung flashlights. The room was filled with rapidly moving rays of light as the soldiers nervously swept the area in search of the enemy. As planned, Burrus' pack members around the room began to whirr their combat drills. Immediately soldiers began to turn their lights chaotically towards multiple sources of the sound. The drilling noise was coming from all over the place. Only military discipline prevented them from firing blindly at the potential enemy location.

To add fuel to the fire, Burrus ordered some of his Crawlers to show glimpses of themselves to the disoriented soldiers, without engaging them. As expected, visual contact with the enemy was too much for

the stressed humans. Without orders from their superiors, soldiers opened fire in all directions. Veer-myn provocateurs quickly took cover and let the incoming energy lasers bypass them and their hiding spots by far.

The state of chaos and roaring was what the Veer-myn were looking for. Not stopping their combat drills, rat men waited patiently. Finally Blangor's pack has arrived.

Directly above each position of the would-be ambushers, four drills in a square pattern pierced the ceiling. Their whizzing was drowned out by the chaotic fusillade and more drills encircling the room. Once they broke free, they were withdrawn. Seconds later something big and heavy stomped at the center of the square designated by the four holes, and this part of the ceiling collapsed along with the creature that was standing on it. The metal plate hit the ground with a loud thud. For a few seconds surprised soldiers could see a Veer-myn monstrosity armed with a huge drill and some version of the rats' energy weapon. It was also carrying a strange device on its back, which looked like a hastily-gathered collection of flashlights, reflectors and other random light bulbs. They were not given a long time to look at the invader, as the hulking Nightmare turned on its drill in one hand and also the strange device on its back. Suddenly the defenders were blinded by the barrage of flashing strobe light. They only heard the heavy footsteps of the creature and the sound of more Veer-myn jumping into the room and charging at them with a roar.

For the poor soldiers, death had arrived in slow motion, in the company of blinding light and maddening sounds of combat drills tearing them apart.

Unaffected by the chaos around her, a fully armored figure was leaning against the wall, one knee bent and feet touching the wall. With both arms crossed on her chest, she tilted her fully enclosed helmet and stood motionless, ignored by the people running around and shouting reports and orders.

Her HUD was flooding with reports, security cameras' footage, alerts from motion and fire detectors and other alert sensors. Her enhanced brain was absorbing and processing all of the data easily.

She allowed part of her mind to focus on the conversation taking place in the command and control room, where Adam Kovalsky was slowly but surely falling into despair. He was trying to keep up appearances by his typical bursts of anger, but he couldn't fool her. Countless sensors and signal analyzers told her clearly he was on the edge. She decided it was time to act if this last stand of humanity on the planet should survive.

The doors to the room swung open. All heads turned to the entrance where the fully armored figure stood. It was the Enforcer observer who had initiated the Grounding Protocol. She was their doom, but she could also become their beacon of hope.

- Enforcer P12-6-12, access level Gamma. Commander Kovalsky, I'm relieving you from your duty and I am taking charge. Mr Watts, please switch to the backup energy source immediately. Order your people fighting at the helipad to abandon their positions and withdraw to the central hub. But tell them to do it in team by team fashion, covering one another – not as a terrified mob. And please make way, I would like to use the communication terminal.

All eyes gathered in the room brightened with hope. The armored woman walked over to the console and inserted a probe protruding from a computer on her forearm. Instantly, the screen displayed a series of commands granting access to all systems, including long range communication.

- Enforcer P12-6-12, access level Gamma. High threat level for citizens and corporate equipment detected. Requesting bombardment of these coordinates and a strike team for defense of High Value Assets and possible hunt.

Everyone in the room exhaled with sudden relief at the one word coming from the speakers.

-Acknowledged.

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Skittering Nightcrawlers finished decoupling everything from the geothermal energy source – a massive blend of multiple machines,

tirelessly converting heat from the planet's core into usable energy for the rest of the human population that still inhabited the inhospitable planet. Other rats moved on to working on the wires themselves. They began winding them on a spool, touching it from time to time with a strange electrical device in a shape of a rod. Sometimes, based on the rod's indications, they cut parts of the cable away and brgan spooling anew.

Burrus nodded with contempt, glanced at the geotherm one more time, and took off to the surface. Quickly running through and climbing up Veer-myn controlled tunnels and shafts, he reached it in no time. There, the two packs coordinated their efforts in dismantling a human cannon. *His* brethren focused on the wiring, buzzing transformers, humming capacitors, and flapping rotors. His brother's pack, interested in the cannon itself, was tasked with packing the parts on lined-up tunnellers and transporting it back to their workshops near the main hive.

Blangor's sentries were guarding the area above the ground, while Burrus' were covering the maze-like system of underground corridors. Humans were quite easily driven away from their positions.; Burrus suspected it to be a tactical retreat with an ongoing counter charge, but not for another 4 hours least. In his experience, humans were very slow in reacting and adjusting to new situations. Their paper-related chain of command required long conversations and strange computer letters. Everything could be easily and quickly told and discussed by a complex series of squeaks, whiskers' movement and few pheromones. His kind was much more efficient in terms of giving orders and generally reacting to a danger. Especially when the Brood Mother was threatened.

The weakness of their guards was exposed when something terrified Blangor, who squeaked a warning, causing instinctive reaction in all Nightcrawlers on the ground, and indirectly alerting those underground as well. The warning was being relayed further away, and soon most of his brethren were looking for cover and awaiting the inevitable attack.

The expected attack arrived with a thundering roar of missiles. They hit the ground all over the place and ejected their deadly cargo – with a deafening bangs of explosions, crackling flames washed over the area. They were followed by a flying wall of

shrapnel that eviscerated any rat on their path and clattered against metal creates and building walls. The last salvo held the blue light of plasma eruptions, lighting the area like a group of miniature suns. This released their EM charges, effectively immobilizing most of the vehicles – except for the Veer-myn's, which were mostly mechanical, and didn't rely on electronics. All of their equipment would be treated as backward and laughable by most of the sentient races in the galaxy, but definitely not in such circumstances. Once their crews recovered, they rolled out their vehicles again, setting up the route to the closest tunnel entrance; for some of them, they triggered their mighty drills and started to dig a new pathway for themselves.

Following the smoking trail left by the shredding missiles, sleek flying machines followed. A wing of three aircraft drove up, lit the plaza with discreet grit of red targeting lights, searching for living targets. The crafts opened fire with their forward solid-shot batteries and wing-mounted energy weapons. Scores of his brethren were caught in the fusillade before they either found a sufficient cover at the plaza or reached the tunnellers and dug behind them. Incoming rounds rebounded with showers of sparks from heavily armored vehicles while the laser beams marked the battered hulls with red-hot stigma before the energy dissipated harmlessly.

Burrus took cover in the makeshift tunnel beside the now empty position where the thermal cannon was emplaced before. He did not flee to the safety of the dark tunnels below the ground yet. Instead, he had decided to watch the withdrawal and get a glimpse of a new enemy.

All of their transports were half-way buried in the ground. The enemy flyers seemed content with hunting fleeing rats, but one of them drove up close to the tunnellers' position and the a barrel of a new weapon, protruded out, somewhat similar to the now-disassembled thermal cannon. Burrus watched as the gun came to life. There was a series of sizzling sounds of energy coils charging, the subtle patter of pistons loading something into the gun, and a growing sound of cooling fans playing a new melody for his ears.

Without any warning the cannon emitted a cold, white lance of energy, directed at one of the Veer-myn vehicles. Along with the blinding stream of light, the cannon shouted its battle cry. It was

unusual, an ultrasonic, modulated beat that mesmerized Burrus.

The beam of searing light connected with one of the fleeing tunnellers. Upon impact it instantly melted the vehicle's external armour and vaporized the insides, insides which immediately disappeared in the howling winds created by the blast.

The tunnel entrance created by the destroyed machine turned into a wound in the earth, still glowing brightly in the dark of the night. When his excitement lessened, Burrus noticed his pulse still reverberating the modulated rhythm of the cannon firing. He forced himself to move and vanish into the tunnel, but just before the safety of the darkness enveloped him, he turned his head to where his brother stood. And there he was, also astir and glancing at his sibling.

Two Veer-myn brothers easily read each-other's feelings behind buttery eyes and twitching whiskers. They had yet another common cause.

Ultraviolet

by Sebastian Pietrzak

A lonely creature peeked around the corner of a building. Only his twitching whiskers and slowly waving tail were a source of any movement – not quite enough for the motion detectors to be alerted. The darkness of the night was enveloping him tightly; the spot he had chosen for hiding was not lit by a single spotlight, and even the occasional searchlight from the central sensory tower was steering clear of it.

He spotted few tempting places where his brothers and sisters could arrive undetected, steal anything of interest, and disappear before the dense humans would even notice something was missing. Perhaps few guards would also go missing in the process, but that went without saying.

Even though recon was his main mission this night, Blangor could not focus entirely on his task. Part of him was ever vigilant, always reacting to even smallest change of light intensity, hue, or blinking repetition. Anytime his subconscious would detect anything of interest, he would rapidly change his focus to the source of this feeling. Usually it was nothing – soldiers on a routine patrol waving their flashlights, LED lights of surveillance equipment, or a reflection of a crawling searchlight on the surface of some equipment. These cases were quickly judged irrelevant, and his focus moved back to the scouting task again.

Suddenly, the quiet of the night was broken by distant gunfire. He pricked up his ears, assessed the direction of the incoming fusillade, and quickly left his concealed position. By holding on to the narrow alleys and shadows cast by the buildings and avoiding any lit areas, Blangor arrived near one of the fortified positions of the Space Port. The fortification was guarding a big and now empty concrete square where human flying machines could land. Searing emerald lights of gamma rays from his brothers and blinding, cold-blue lights of human lasers illuminated the battleground. Even though the flickering light show was confusing to the human eyes, it was enough for Blangor's sensitive eyes to see as clearly as if it was

daylight. The battle was too far for his nose to detect characteristic chem compounds of the pack, but not for his eyes – the distinct spectrum of the light generated by the ray guns of the attacking rats clearly stated it was Lugens' pack. He knew his biochem inclinations – gamma fire was only a tool to confuse the opponent, suppress their return fire so that the main part of the attacking force could come closer and spray the defenders with deadly fluids that could easily separate flesh from bones and melt equipment.

The observing Veer-myn was about to leave when suddenly a strange humming noise and subtle blueish light aura caught his attention. Following both senses, Blangor located the source – behind the enemy positions there was an out of place device: it looked like a laser cannon turret such as the ones he saw on human tanks. This one, however, was not mounted, but rather crouching on the ground like an emplaced autocannon. Following the trail of blueish light, he realized a tangle of cables was attached to the machine, while its other end disappeared in the ground about 20 meters away. A dozen seconds later, the cannon flashed a cluster of diodes and started to adjust its aim. Once in position, it sucked all the light from cables, flashed its diodes once more, and fired.

It was not the typical transitory bright lance he was accustomed to. Instead, it was a constant, gleaming stream of burning light. A series of discharges could be seen along the path of the beam. Between them, microsecond bursts of incinerated matter caught in the path were adding beauty to the phenomenon. Where the lance hit the target, the ground was melting, creeping Veer-myn were turning into ash, and even the mighty tunnellers were reduced to smoldering wracks cut in two, still red-hot at the cleavage sites. The cannon rotated itself on its turntable and moved its mighty beam over the most of the attacking Veer-myn force. The rest of the invading pack quickly scurried away, looking for cover and leaving the battlefield as soon as they could.

After this act of destruction, the cannon powered itself down, moving back to the initial position and beginning a cooling process. Even this part drew Blangor's attention: whirring fans inside the cannon's barrel were throwing masses of hot air outside. The red-hot tip of the barrel, at the painful edge of near-melting, was ejecting clouds of sparks, dancing in the ever-present cold wind of Exham IV and inexorably disappearing in the night sky.

The lonely rat stood motionlessly for a long time, until cannon's barrel lost its red-hot color and nothing else came from it. Only then did he leave his post and disappear into the night. If anyone was able to see his eyes and read Veer-myn emotions, they would see a mix of awe, excitement, sadness and almost painful desire.

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- *Mr. Watts, please fill us in.* – The tired voice of the Space Port commander came out of a hunched figure at the top of the table in the conference room. Commander Adam Kovalsky buried his head in his hands, exhaled heavily, and readied himself for a fresh barrage of grim news from his subordinates.

- *Yes, sir.* – *The* adjutant standing by the main screen on the wall clicked something on the pilot in his hand and began his report. – *Over the course of the last 7 days we have encountered 24 acts of vandalism, including theft – 7 of them probably caused by Veer-myn, 13 acts of civil unrest – three of them changing into open riots – and 4 Veer-myn attacks. Two of these were targeting the helipad and its surroundings. One of them was serious enough to approve usage of Thermal PaK.*

As expected the last statement caused some eyebrows to be frowned and more spontaneous reaction of a Head of Logistics.

- The thermal cannon?! That beast consumes a horrendous amount of energy in a single discharge. We could power and warm 5 residential hubs for two weeks! Do I really have to remind you all over again that this planet is one giant iceblock 'round the clock, and the geothermal energy is the last source of heat on the whole…

- *That is enough!* – Commander Kovalsky snapped at the malcontent. – *Dead people don't need energy nor warmth! Rats don't need living people! They want our equipment. We want our equipment. These two contradicting facts generate some disputes between our two races, understand? If the report states the situation was critical and required the Thermal cannon to be used, then please acknowledge the fact and celebrate this with silence. Mr. Watts please continue.* – The rising crescendo of his voice kept everyone at the edge of their seats; his

final words were spat out rather than spoken. Only the adjutant, used to the commander's outbursts of anger, was not affected by it. He calmly changed the slide and looked at the Communications Specialist.

- Mr. Tarczynsky has some suspicions regarding our caudate friends. Please.

Marek Tarczynsky stood and swapped places with the adjutant. Commander Kovalsky lifted his head again and focused on the presenter. Tarczynsky would not often speak during these meetings, but when he did it was regarding something important and valuable for the sake of the colony.

- Gentlemen. As Mr. Watts said before, last week there were 7 rat-related acts of vandalism, including theft of equipment, modifications of devices to work differently and even one case of bodies of infected people being stolen from the cold room. Let me dwell into the details of some of them. They seem unusual, and I think we should try to analyze them – in my opinion their distinct… circumstances and agendas will shine a light on rats' behavior, habits, and motivations…

- Marek this is not some nature program. We're trying to survive, remember? – One of the other participants of the meeting cut in.

– Ah, I forgot about that. Thank you for pointing that out Jack.

– Sarcasm won't help but will make me go over there and speak directly to your face, you-

- Stop. – Again, the Commander spoke up to calm down the assembled group. – *Mr. Tarczynsky, correct me if I'm wrong: you say there are some factions in their ranks with distinct features, habits, and agendas. You think we might somehow exploit them to cause infighting once we discover and understand them?*

- Not quite factions, sir. There is probably one Brood Mother somewhere out there, keeping order with an iron fist… or claw… but under her, there are various packs. We know the most numerous Veer-myn are Nightcrawlers, but the most elite soldiers and scientists of sort are the

Maligni. My observations indicate there are few packs led by notable, Maligni, each with various inclinations; notable among their race, of course. It seems their interests affect rest of the pack, which follows their lead and fulfils their agendas. If we are able to discover and understand them – as you said General – we might be able to stage a tempting target for a given pack, and prepare an ambush. Fighting them on our terms might be easier and safer, and won't require a Thermal cannon's help – a quick, conspiratorial look at the Head of Logistics caused muffled snorts around the table.

- I like this idea Mr. Tarczynsky. These furry bastards tend to act from the shadows, strike unseen, and spread panic before the first shots are even fired. I would certainly like to see them at the receiving end at last. I relieve you from your other duties – focus on footage analysis, and give me some facts we can use against these cheese eaters.

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Ceiling lights were illuminating only the central part of the corridor, leaving the sides wrapped in comfy darkness. A singular figure was sneaking in the shadows, precisely avoiding the patches of light. Quick, restless steps were leading interloper deeper into the corridor. At some point his sharp senses detected a subtle twinkling of the light in the distance. He knew what this meant – the battle had already started. His whiskers moved in excitement at the thought of the upcoming show and he picked up his pace.

Shortly thereafter Blangor arrived at the entrance to the big production hall where human azure lasers and emerald beams of his clan mates were flickering across the room. There were nearly no casualties yet.: soldiers had fortified their position with modular shieldwalls and emplaced heavy laser cannons. They were both relieved and amused – from their perspective, the attacking Veermyn force had been washing their positions with highly inaccurate and ineffective fire. Blangor knew this was not the case. His sensitive eyes were able to see the truth that insensible humans could not perceive. Colors, hues, abrupt light eruptions when ray gun's beam hit the mark – they all created precalculated patterns, visible to his eyes long after the shot. It was a truly magnificent show.

Reluctantly, the unseen observer reminded himself about his own role in this play. He looked away from the spectacle and merged with the shadows again. Unseen, he reached the panel on the wall and opened it gently, almost reverently. Taking out of his pocket some tools set, he began to tinker with the electronics inside.

Troopers, encouraged by their minimal losses, started to lean out from behind the cover in order to get a clear shot. Until now, rat men were very good at changing their positions rapidly and utilizing production machines as cover; now the soldiers were able to see their movement more clearly and were able to predict where sprinting rat might show its silhouette next. A few aggressors had already died when they were caught by the azure streams of light in the middle of a jump.

Suddenly, despite no command being uttered and no signal being seen, all of the Veer-myn stopped their fusillade. The unexpected stillness surprised the defender: their own fire lessened, and then stopped completely as no targets were visible anymore. Soldiers started to look around, searching for some answers or commands. Whoever was in charge was also apparently taken by surprise, and wasn't sure what to do in this situation. Before he was able to give an order, the top lights in the hall went gone dark. A second later they flickered back to life – but this time the light was not the same. Instead of typical cold, white light, there was a tiring and irritating blue light.

As if it was a signal for the Veer-myn, they resumed their attack. This time, however, it was totally different. Troopers leaning out from behind the shieldwalls were lit with dozens of ray beams, collapsing on the ground with their bodies and faces burned and deformed. Emplaced laser cannons were barraged so heavily with the ray energy that they started to accumulate heat in their metal parts, while melting all the plastic components; soon, their operators were completely unable to use them. The intensity of the incoming fire and its accuracy forced the defenders to keep their profiles low and stay ducked behind the shieldwall.

Blangor watched the performance with contempt. In the blue light, seasoned with a touch of ultraviolet, his brothers and sisters' ray

beams looked even more beautiful than in normal visible light. The red-hot laser cannons were adding warmth to the picture before him. A few purposeful gamma rays destroyed some of the fluorescents above the enemy position, adding even more dynamics to the scene with electric sparkles and light flickering in the glass crumbs.

The lone observer was torn between the beauty of this final act of the spectacle and the fact that this was a sign for a direct charge on the enemy positions. Stalkers rushed from their concealed positions and started to climb and jump over the enemy fortifications in two zones that suddenly were omitted by the ongoing gamma ray fusillade. Afterwards, it was a short work for a ray pistol and a knife. Ugly, but necessary.

Blangor flinched and shook the excitement off. He flipped a switch in the still-open panel on the wall and changed the lights back to the cold white. He closed the panel diligently and moved across the room to the barricades, now devoid of enemy life, and started to give commands to his pack.

***

Two GCPS technicians were observing the monitors intently. The one sitting behind the console was keying something from time to time and switching different camera views, while the other one, leaning behind him was focusing his sight on one screen only. After reviewing the recording from one of the battles inside production hall PH-7, he was sure there was something more, that some purpose was steering the actions of the Veer-myn. It was no coincidence their accuracy suddenly improved and their stratagems outsmarted experienced GCPS platoon in their territory and fighting on their terms. Switching the light mode to blue and ultraviolet was a clever move, stunning the defenders and affecting their ability to track their fast moving targets.

However, something was amiss. He felt some hidden reason behind all these actions. Destroying some of the lights above the soldiers' positions would not have really helped the rats, nor debilitated their enemy. The connection between disabling the lights and their subsequent charge was obvious, yet the reason still eluded Marek.

The screen he was so intently studying was showing the beset GCPS positions. Even in low resolution of a CCTV camera he was able to spot rats silhouettes creeping in the dark or behind the cover. However, this was not what he was interested in. Enemy movements and tactics in general were a data source for military analysts. Marek was a technician: specifically, a comms specialist. He was searching for a different information. For some time he had been watching closely where the ray beams were hitting the shieldwalls. It was clear to anyone – their aim was horrible, and nearly all of the rays were washing over the barricade instead of converging on the heads or limbs of the enemy that were protruding from cover.

- Okay, stop. Rewind to the beginning of the attack – no whining! Save the positions where beams hit the shieldwall. Ignore any that hit a soldier or a piece of equipment. Then apply them to a grid.

The technician behind the console ran his fingers over the keyboard, keying in a series of commands for the surveillance system. After a minute of calculations a grid was draw on one of the screens. Two people in the room were quietly staring at the screen. That silence lengthened until Marek broke it:

- What the heck. I knew something was wrong, but this is too much. A creepy rat – the one who arrived during the battle and modified the lighting in the room – was definitely amused by the battle, but is it possible he was looking at this the whole time?

The points on the grid clearly arranged in a series of Koch Snowflake fractals.

***

Soldiers were finishing lying out LED strips in the corridors of the underground facility near the helipad. They were placed near the walls, not interfering with one walking the passage, but creating the mood with their discrete lights. Once turned on and shifted to a special mode developed by comms specialist Tarczynsky, they gently flickered. However, what was a gentle change in light intensity for human eyes, was – according to him – actually rather

striking and compelling for the Veer-myn that stalked these hallways.

For the last two hours, they had laid the strips according to Tarczynsky's orders in order to prepare a lure for the rat men. The light pathways would lead them to concealed gun emplacements with overlapping fields of fire, already awaiting their arrival in full readiness.

The troopers knew they were not the only one assigned a similar task. Squad D12 was responsible for the laborious task of emplacing and connecting a series of speakers, subwoofers and tweeters in a pattern devised by the same technician. The soldiers had heard they were hunting for different packs of rats which had different inclinations. Even if not convinced by the scientific mumbo-jumbo, they were glad the command had a plan for getting rid of the vermin. There was enough on their plate, even without the rat infestation.

Once all the preparations were complete, the teams went dark. All communications cut off, all unnecessary movement forbidden; only forward observers were moving slightly to check all of the paths the enemy could use. In the complete silence, a man gifted with sharpest hearing could sense muffled thumping coming from all around them – these were the baits for the other pack.

Time dragged on and made the soldiers relax and focus attention on anything more interesting than an empty hallway or the feeling of a trigger under their index finger. Only men with best hearing became concerned. The already familiar thumping sounds changed slightly. The rhythm and intensity changed. Also, some new sounds were added to this background noise. This situation lasted for some time, until everyone was able to hear shrill sound coming from all around behind the walls and even floor.

Suddenly the room erupted with activity. The walls and floor were pierced by huge, whizzing drills which tore the reinforced concrete and metal crates as if they were paper. Once they broke free, the drills slowed down. Holes in the walls were then violently extended by the bulky frame of a giant Veer-myn wielding the modified mining equipment. They charged without hesitation at the mortified

soldiers, clearing the entrance. They were followed by a flood of fur spilling from the gaps. Groups of Nightcrawlers ran into the room and started shooting their ray pistols into the concealed positions of the humans. Quick steps guided charging rats to the gun emplacements and with the final jump over the barricade, and the Veer-myn went into brutal melee. A jagged knife struck a shower of orange sparks when it met a combat blade and a fist met the claw that could lacerate kevlar. Finally the hulking monstrosities caught up to the rest and pushed their whirring drills into the aghast soldiers, who were torn apart in an instant by the rotating drills.

Some of the troopers recovered and brought their weapons to bear. Small arms fire flashed chaotically all around the redoubt. Soldiers manning the heavy weapons tried to relocate them but they were too cumbersome: in the end, the elaborate trap did not spring as it was envisioned. Overlapping fields of heavy fire targeting tempting LED pathways became the doom of the would-be ambushers.

Reports were flooding tactical displays in the command and control room. Adam Kovalsky was watching in silence as his soldiers were torn apart by the groups of alien vermin. Intricate networks of feints and ambushes were falling apart by the counter-plans of Veer-myn. They had less finesse but more cunning and brutality. And more efficiency, as reality had harshly proven.

- Commander! Units guarding the helipad report a massive attack from underground!

- Fire the Thermal Cannon. At will.

- Yes, sir. Relaying orders… Sir… The cannon is offline.

- What do you mean? Turn it up and burn those rats to crisps! – A mix of anger and fear caused Adam to spit saliva when shouting his orders.

- Reports coming in. – Ah… the… the surviving technicians and security cameras indicate that simultaneous attack in the geoterminal cut off the cannon's main energy source. Right now aliens are decoupling our other sources as well.

The commander sat heavily in his command chair and froze with a grimace of resignation on his face. The racket in the room was not getting to him. Officers were awaiting new orders that were not coming. Nobody was sure what to do and they only stared at each other's faces, looking for an indication that someone knows what should be done.

All heads turned to the entrance where a fully armored figure stood. It was the Enforcer observer who initiated the Grounding Protocol. She was their doom, but she could also become their beacon of hope.

- Enforcer P12-6-12, access level Gamma. Commander Kovalsky, I'm relieving you from your duty and I am taking charge. Mr Watts, please switch to the backup energy source immediately. Order your people fighting at the helipad to abandon their positions and withdraw to the central hub. But tell them to do it in proper fashion, team by team, covering one another – not as a terrified mob. And please make way, I would like to use the communication terminal.

All eyes gathered in the room brightened with hope. The armored woman walked over to the console and inserted some probe protruding from a computer on her forearm. Instantly, the screen displayed a series of commands granting access to all systems, including long range communication.

- Enforcer P12-6-12, access level Gamma. High threat level for citizens and corporate equipment detected. Requesting bombardment of transmitted coordinates and a strike team for defense of High Value Assets and possible hunt.
Everyone in the room exhaled with sudden relief at the one word coming from the speakers.

- Acknowledged.

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The giant Nightmares finished packing the disassembled red-hot energy cannon into the lined up tunnellers. Burrus' pack was also done with decoupling all the cabling from the weapon's turntable. Even though their main prize was hidden deep underneath the port,

the subtle hum of wires transporting the energy was also of interest to them. Blangor did not argue with his brother over whom the cables should belong to. Occasional short circuits were sometimes glamorous indeed, but unhelpful and quite devastating – better to miss the show than to knit together all the wiring back. Also, nearby pack members tend to die if the power transfer was high.

Almost at the same time, all the Crawlers attending packing scattered away to find other tasks. Nightmares climbed the vehicles and settled down at the top, grabbing handrails meant for this ad-hoc transport. Powerful engines in the tunnelling machines whirred and started to spit clouds of black, greasy smoke into the air. Dim sunlight darkened even more and the noon started to resemble the dusk. His Scourges, spraying area with chem markers – hallmarks of his pack – created even more fumes, blurring everyone's vision.

The convoy began its journey to the closest tunnel entrance. Blangor didn't want to expose the cannon parts to the dangers of digging a new tunnel in an enemy territory – given the humans' withdrawal, he decided to reuse the same subterranean route they used to assail them. He had this area covered with eyes and whiskers both on the ground and beneath it, and he was feeling confident they had driven off all the baldies and no one remained to threaten his cargo.

But he had no one above the ground.

Blangor's peripheral vision spotted a series of small blinking lights in the distance, high above the ground. He turned directly to this new phenomenon and cocked his head in wonder. Lights vanished, but small objects were moving closer in their stead. Moments later his eyes widened and fur bristled in sudden realization – the incoming objects were missiles. He squealed a warning. Natural instinct, more effective than any military drill could dream of, caused masses of fur and tails to change into a blur of brown and grey streaks of Veer-myn running for cover.

Then the missiles hit.

The recently-pacified battlefield was lit by the fires of war once again. Rockets struck all over the plaza, where most of the rat men

stood seconds ago. Upon the contact with the ground, the missiles exploded with bright orange bursts of fire, followed by the clouds of dark silhouettes of shrapnel and a grand finale of blinding, flickering blue light of plasma eruption, vaporizing anything in the vicinity of the blast. Blangor, his eyes used to sudden flashes, watched this with a mix of fear and amusement. Once the show finished, only bodies of his fallen brothers and sisters remained in the plaza. His amusement vanished; only fear remained.

Following the smoking trail left by the shredding missiles, sleeks flying machines followed. A wing of three aircraft flew up, lit the plaza with discreet grids of red targeting lights, searching for living targets. Crafts opened fire with their forward solid-shot batteries and wing-mounted energy weapons. Scores of his brethren were caught in the fusillade before they either found sufficient cover at the plaza or reached the tunnellers and dug in behind them. Incoming rounds rebounded with showers of sparks from heavily armored vehicles while the laser beams marked the battered hulls with red-hot slag before the energy dissipated harmlessly.

Knowing what their priorities were, the drivers of the tunnelling machines brought their powerful drills to life, lifted the rear of the vehicles, and began to descend. The air resounded with an almost painful grind and the hulls of the vehicles were lit by yet another source of sparks, where drill heads ground through the reinforcement rods in the ground. Blangor ran for the closest entrance to the drainage tunnels. Once he reached it, he hid for cover but did not go further. He poked his head up in order to supervise the withdrawal of the transports with his precious cargo. He caught a glimpse of his brother Burrus doing the same.

All of their transports were halfway buried in the ground. The enemy flyers seemed content with hunting fleeing rats, but one of them flew up close to the tunnellers' position and protruded a barrel of a new weapon, somewhat similar to the now-disassembled thermal cannon. Blangor watched as the gun came to life. Series of LED lights and coils on its housing began to emit cold, blue light. An ever growing stream of flickering white particles began its descent into the cannons maw, as if the weapon was sucking the energy even from the air itself, not just its internal power source. Even through the noise of battle Blangor heard the humming of the loading gun.

Without any warning the cannon reversed the stream of particles and emitted a cold, white lance of energy, directed at one of the Veer-myn vehicles. Blangor could not take his eyes away. The constant stream of raw energy, wrapped with coils of flickering discharges, was so intense it bent the light as if it was a prism rather than insubstantial flow of energy. The air along the beam was gleaming with all colors of the rainbow, mesmerizing the paralyzed rat even more.

The beam connected with one of the fleeing tunnellers. Upon impact, it instantly melted the vehicle's external armor and vaporized the interior.

Long seconds after the ray vanished along with its target, afterimages were still visible to anyone watching. The tunnel entrance created by the destroyed machine turned into a wound in the earth, still glowing brightly in the dark of the night. When his excitement lessened, he also noticed his pulse still reverberated to the modulated rhythm of the cannon firing. Once he realized this, he remembered hearing the unusual, ultrasonic modulated beat – he knew what it meant. If it was interesting for him, it had to be a feast for his brother's ears. He forced himself to move and vanish into the vent, but just before the safety of the darkness enveloped him, he turned his head to where his brother stood just before the attack. And there he was, also astir and glancing at his sibling.

Two Veer-myn brothers easily read each other's feelings behind yellow eyes and twitching whiskers. They had yet another common cause.

Operation Intimacy

Leaked by Agent Hellebore

Ashen rain trickled down heavy girders as S-52 discretely tailed subject alpha from on high. It had taken months of subtle inquiries and not inconsiderate bribes to bring him here, to this Forgefather border planet. Research had determined that Forgefather interests here were more than they seemed and S-52 now believed some special project was being undertaken.

The Forgefathers were a highly advanced and secretive species, almost paranoid and yet they eagerly sold their technology to the highest bidder. This dichotomy was less outrageous than it first appeared as they placed failsafe devices in all their products to prevent tampering or reverse engineering. As most Corp Central ultratech was derived from them, Control had been forced to drain their petty cash to develop the equipment S-52 was using during this operation, to avoid those same Forgefather safeguards.

S-52's crypsis field shimmered and sparked as the rain suddenly increased as lightning raced across the sky. Apparently they didn't count on stormy weather he thought sourly. The heavy set Forgefather at the end of the road stopped and turned to peer down the path. S-52's cyberhanced body reacted in the blink of an eye, locking his musculature and stopping his circulatory system, keeping him perfectly still, clinging to a megagirder five metres up. Oxyplants kicked in to continue cellular respiration until the subject turned and continued down the dark corridor of steel. Icons blinked off on his occ-HUD as his parallel cyber system removed the locks on his musculature and S-52 continued his vertiginous pursuit.

The subject had appeared on S-52's radar as a low level brokkr merchant and he'd almost dismissed him outright had it not been for the statistically significant increase in his consumption of Syphr cuisine. Patient surveillance had revealed an extremely subtle clandestine meeting structure that involved the trading of meal orders between subject alpha and another, beta, sitting at a separate table. It had taken S-52 a week to realise it was the size, type and year of beverage the Forgefathers ordered that were the most

important aspects of the code.

All that had led him here, trailing alpha through a construction district. The densely packed gantries, cranes and construction materials had given S-52 excellent points of entry and cover and his sub dermal implants allowed him to climb virtually any surface. However the density and variety of the metals and alloys used by the Forgefathers was playing merry havoc with his comms and tracking, forcing him to stick extremely close to alpha in order not to lose him.

Alpha made a final turn and disappeared from view. Overriding his oxyplants S-52 hyper-oxygenated his system and boosted his speed. Jumping from girder to girder he sailed over a gap between two mega-crane cabs and his occ-HUD suddenly registered alpha's marker below. Reversing his direction with a quick twist and push, S-52 climbed down the second cab to regain his subject. He spied him under the arch of the mega-crane tracks next to another Forgefather. As they conversed in their own language, S-52's amplifiers recorded and translated it for him through the occ-HUD.

'Heat is done. Power restored.'

'Blade agreed?'

'Within structure.'

Alpha handed designate gamma a tiny pad of paper before ducking out from the tracks and heading back in the direction he had come. Paper? The Forgefathers wouldn't normally use something so primitive or difficult to hide. Do they suspect surveillance? It would explain why S-52 was unable to find any information on any of the devices carried by alpha or kept at his residence. The unusual methods and behaviour of the Forgefathers involved in this special project were beginning to paint a picture of something of great importance.

His occ-HUD suddenly pinged, indicating an image it caught had been interpolated. The point count was too low for a high level analysis, but initial regression suggested a military application.

S-52 shifted his primary target to gamma and followed him out of the district. With comms back online he submitted his report to Control. After the requisite time a single response was received:

‘Continue.’

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Flesh erupted in gobbets as S-52 tore his nanogauntlet through what passed for the autoch’s throat. Acrid fluids spray in all directions as the beast coughed and gargled in an attempt to breathe through its shredded anatomy. With a swift backhand S-52 caved in the side of its head and continued on through the foetid plant life suffocating the land, searching for subject Mu’s trail.

Five months had passed since the clandestine handover between subject’s Beta and Gamma. Five months of dead ends, false trails and goose-chasing across half a sector. In that time S-52 had gone through eight separate subjects before finding Mu. A high ranking forgefather (subject Lambda) working for Halder etc Corp had taken a sudden junket to the Gorian homeworld, ostensibly to promote the Halder etc brand of elastowear. In reality he met with Mu, a beardless Forgefather who seemed to issue him orders before leaving on a trip to wild space, not two parsecs from the planet S-52 had found subject Gamma. In five months S-52 had trekked hundreds of light years just to travel six.

This world was on no charts and no explorafiles were available through the normal subscription channels. Yet when he landed he found a once inhabited planet overrun with noxious jungle. Mu’s movements were hard to track through the dense undergrowth due to the heavy metals absorbed into their tissues. What little time he had to scan, S-52 found the ruined cities comprised materials often seen in Corporation construction. Blockaded roads, warning signs and damage all pointed to an insurrection of some kind, yet the lack of planetary record implied something worse.

The S-52 dodged around a tree trunk, avoiding the spiderwasp nest hanging from its branches. The necrotising toxin in the saliva of those massive creatures overpowered even S-52’s enhanced immune system.

During early surveillance of Mu, S-52 had secreted nanopore pheromone emitters into their clothing. The convoluted surface area of the nanopores stored massive quantities of the chemical tracer and were small enough to become lodged in the microscopic dermal cracks of dead skin. S-52 was more than a day behind Mu but despite this, the pervasive humidity and aerosol density, his olfactory sensors were able to pick up tracer density gradients. The occ-HUD extrapolated this into most likely paths through the undergrowth, overlaying a glowing spider web of potentiality. Following the highest probability path for several hours, S-52 came to a ridge. Looking down his occ-HUD found the outline of an industrial structure in the screen.

An anomalous grunt suddenly reverberated through the undergrowth, freezing S-52 in his tracks. Sound libraries analysed the possible origins of the sound, indicating either Grogan or more likely Orx. Marauders... fantastic, S-52 sighed. Using his subderms S-52 climbed backwards up the nearest tree and locked himself in place. The Forgefathers had probably hired the Marauders as disposable guards, far too preoccupied with the loot they were being paid than to consider what they were protecting.

The Orx emerged suddenly from between twisted trunks, moving far more quietly than something that big had any right to do. It covered the clearing S-52 was in moments before, while its brethren moved in behind. Their fieldcraft and battle training was impressive, but then S-52 wasn't in the habit of playing fair. His months of covert operations had given him time to tweak the damned crypsis field so it barely flickered in even the heaviest electrical storms. Here in the humid undergrowth it made him all but undetectable.

A three man recon team shouldn't be hard to avoid, S-52 thought. It would be best not to kill them so as to prevent disrupting their communication network. That would surely alert the Forgefathers to his presence. He clung silently to the lower branches, waiting for the aliens to continue on their patrol. All but the third had passed beneath his hiding spot when S-52's occ-HUD flickered and the crypsis field suddenly died. For a split second he remained motionless in his muscle locked position as the Orx' head tilted upwards to stare slack-jawed into his face.

Emergency protocols kicked in, flooding S-52's system with adrenalin and acetylcholine and launching him from the tree at the surprised orx. Monoblades extended from S-52's nanogauntlets as he flew over the orx head, gripping its cheeks and flipping behind it. The force of the manoeuvre tore the orx head from its shoulders, its body collapsing with a squelching thud. With primal instinct his team mates turned and opened up on S-52, pouring high velocity shells into the space their fellow was moments before. Bullets thudded against S-52's duroweave and threw him backwards. Twisting in mid air he threw the severed head at the closest orx, smashing it in the face and across its fellow's line of fire. Unable to correct its fire, it tore through the second orx and S-52 lunged over the falling corpse of mortally wounded orx.

Grabbing the end of the barrel S-52 levered himself over the orx, attempting the manoeuvre he pulled on the first of the aliens. A meaty fist shot up, crumpling S-52 in mid air and bouncing him off a tree, the broken barrel of the gun coming with him. Without slowing down the orx began beating S-52 with its broken weapon, keeping him on his knees. Gritting his teeth through the bone splintering pounding S-52 willed a second burst of stimulants through his legs, burning out many of his synth-muscles in the process. The sudden boost surged him upwards, driving his finger tips through the orx solar plexus and out the base of its neck.

The momentum carried him forward onto the corpse and he lay there gasping for several seconds before the oxyplants kicked in. Damn it all to hell he wheezed. The orx had done some substantial damage and it was only a matter of time before their disappearance put the Forgefathers on high alert. It was 5 km to the structure. He could make it. The answer would be there.

Deadzone

by Kenny Moncrieff

The ragtag group waded through the dense jungles.

“I think we needed a better reason for coming here,” said a scrawny man with scruffy red beard.

“So, apprehending a captain of the enforcers, so we can exchange him for a hefty ransom to fund our cause just isn’t good enough for you, Crimson wolf?” asked a tall man with a helmet and one working visor.

“The cooperation probably won’t do it, Wally. In fact they may just trick us and butcher us all.”

“That’s why we’re going to trick them… first of course,” replied a stout person hefting a burst cannon.

“I don’t know, Riser. I just got a bad feeling. Banzai maybe holding off the cooperation’s own retrieval team, but the cooperation isn’t our only threat.”

A rebel moved beside him. “You’ll feel better if you just stop thinking about the dangers and start thinking about the ca-.”

Bullets hammered into the rebel, the rest scattered. Another rebel was shot down.

“Feck. We’ve lost Tamien and Mark!” yelled Crimson wolf. “What’s happening?”

“Ambush I suppose!” replied Riser. “But they’ve only attacked us with one man. Either the cooperation is that cocky or this here’s a diversion. Crimson, snipe the git! Everyone else stay alert!”

Crimson wolf peered through his sniper scope. “Um, I think I see the gunner. But he doesn’t look too well.”

“Oh are you worried a there’s a cold going around?” asked Wally.

“No…” chocked Riser. “But a plague is…”

“Riser!” shouted another rebel. “I’ve spotted movement. Orders?”

“Just stand ready! Crimson! What are you doing? Take out the gunner now!”

Crimson fired. The heavy shooting paused.

“Did you get him?” asked Wally.

“I hit his shoulder.”

“At least that’s stopped him from shooting,” said a rebel.

“Um I don’t think so,” gulped Crimson wolf.

The fire resumed. A man screamed.

“Wh-what’s that on Jenkins!”

An abomination, maybe once human, ripped the rebel like he was holiday wrapping.

“Just fire! Just fire!”

Riser’s bullets punched against it, but it only fell when everyone else fired on it.

“W-we have to get out of here!” squealed a rebel retreating.

“No!” screamed Riser.

“Should I go after him?” requested Wally.

“No!”

They heard the deserter’s scream, followed by the sound of wet smacks and tearing.

“There’s too few of us now!” gasped Riser.

Crimson fired another shot, silencing the heavy weapon. “Target down.”

“You sure?” asked Wally.

“No.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’re abandoning the mission, move!” exclaimed Riser.

“You sure. We just came so close,” said Wally.

“Is that sarcasm?”

One of the things stormed out and swung at Wally with an energy blade. The rebel ducked, the monster severed the tree. Wally stabbed with his knife, but it bounced off its armour. The thing battered Wally back with one kick.

“Wally!” screamed Crimson wolf.

“Should’ve figured,” sighed Riser.

The thing roared and other things in the distant howled.

“I think that thing just made a transmission call and his friends picked up,” said a soldier.

“And they’re coming over,” sneered Riser. “Take him down! Take him down quick!”

They gave the monstrosity everything they had. Defiant, the creature lumbered towards Riser, hauling back its blade. Riser pounced forward. Jammed his weapon into its jaw and the ammunition splattered its head. The monstrosity crumpled down.

Riser panted, staring at the body. “Wally you still up?”

“The thing broke my leg!”

“Crimson, carry him!” Riser threw away his weapon. “Everyone on your marks!”

“But the captain. We should take him anyways?” asked a rebel.

“Yeah, we could claim he’s still alive and hold him for ransom.”

“He’s infected. That means we’ll bring a virus back into our base.”

“Oh.”

Howling shrieks approached.

“And more importantly I don’t think we have time to pack him... Run!”

Storm Born

by Jake Messingham

Chapter 1

Rain hammered down on an alien jungle. Scans had picked up massive thermal indications earlier during the day. Something was down there and it was moving.

A fleet of Rooks burst through the clouds, heat shields still glowing orange with the stresses of planetary entry. Rain fizzled and boiled on the bare metal. “Five minutes till contact,” the pilot shouted through his helmet link. “Acknowledged. Stow your gear and make ready for immediate deployment. Expect resistance and use all force necessary to neutralise any and all threats. I want to quit this world before the Corporation notices we are in this sector,” the hulking mass of armour spoke back to his squad.

Kjell turned to his squad member on the left. “Is he always like this?” he asked on a direct private channel. “He takes some getting used to runt, but you’re new here. Once we make planetfall we are likely to be outnumbered 20 to 1. Even with these fancy new prototype shields and Huscarl Alfinn’s shiny heavy armour we can still get ripped apart out there. Pay attention to your Huscarl and your surroundings, and lets just get the job done fast. Last thing we need is the Corporation sticking their ugly noses in things here,” spat back Godvar.

The Rook finally reached tree level. Coming in on a clearing the pilot finally got a visual on the enemy. “Looks like we have got an infestation of Orx here,” the pilot warned. “Permission to neutralise all targets and create a perimeter granted,” replied Alfinn in a neutral tone, his armour powering up with a groan and whine. The giant underslung Hailstorm autocannons under its wings began to whir, and within seconds were spitting red hot shards of death into the horde below. In under a minute the clearing was a mound of bodies and broken limbs.

Alfinn was the first to leave the Rook. Even before it had landed he

jumped out, leaving a small crater in his wake and striding to the edge of the clearing. “Looks like we are following our fearless leader into the unknown again,” muttered Claus, his large Heat Cannon clutched to his chest already letting of steam as droplets of rain landed on its casing.

One by one the members of Storm Born Squad jumped from the Rook, landing on their short squat legs. “No casualties so far. A lack of any anti air or orbital platforms almost makes this a walk in the park,” stated Edbjorn. “All units have disembarked and reporting in planet wide. Steel Warriors, Mining Teams and Reclamation teams are making planet fall as we speak. Scanners have also picked up a large thermal output several miles to the east in a dense jungle region with a smaller thermal output about halfway between it and us. Could be an outpost of some sort,” he reported to the squad. “That’s our target. We will destroy this outpost first, then onto the larger thermal reading. Move out,” Alfinn replied.

Chapter 2

On a rocky cliff edge Storm Born squad was busy double checking armour and weapons whilst their leader observed the orxs hastily built outpost bellow. “They will see us approaching if we attack head on. Prepare your servos for rapid drop and power up shields and close combat weapons. Guns shouldn’t be needed here,” stated Alfinn.

Minutes later they were falling through the air after stepping off the cliff, Heat Hammers in hand and shields rippling as rain danced on them. Landing in the middle of the outpost with heavy thuds, they smashed skulls and broke limbs in a whirlwind of blood and gore. Within two minutes there wasn’t an orx left alive, just messy blood stained walls and lumps of flesh and ruined bodies on the floor. Not even a shot had been fired by either side.

“Area clear,” exclaimed Edbjorn. “There are only minor thermal readings on scanners between us and the large reading to the east,” he reported.

“Lets move,” Alfinn stated simply.

As they marched on, faster than it would seem capable for creatures of such small stature, they encountered several patrols. Given advanced warning from their scanners, they managed to ambush and kill all that they came across.

After an hour of clearing a path through dense jungle they came across an ancient crumbling ruin. “Looks like some kind of temple. Massive thermals coming from behind that door and a massive energy reading coming from inside too. Our prize is in there,” reported Edbjorn through his helmet link to the squad.

“Inside we go,” said Alfinn, sounding almost happy. “Prepare Heat charges. We will turn the door to slag and anything behind it will either be vaporised or killed by shrapnel,” he laughed cheerfully.

Kjell approached the door nervously waiting for any sign that the orx behind it were going to burst out at any second. Carefully, he placed the heat charges from his armour onto the door in five separate places and ran back to the rest of the squad. Taking cover, Kjell pressed the detonator at his belt, and with a dull thud followed by a wave of heat and molten metal the door was nothing but a misshapen lump of metal.

After waiting for a few minutes for any further movement Alfinn spoke. “Move in, secure the area, and try to find where that energy signature is originating from”

“Acknowledged. Storm Born, move out,” commanded Edbjorn.

Within seconds they had vaulted over the solidifying remains of the door and had secured the room. “Area clear,” said Edbjorn as Alfinn strode in, ducking to get through the hole made by the charges. Glancing around, there were no orx bodies, just lumps of half green burnt flesh sticking to the walls and ceilings. “The energy reading is coming from below. There is a large underground chamber, and a large thermal reading coming from down there too,” he stated.

“Claus, fire your heat cannon at that spot there. The floor seems to be weaker and there,” commanded Alfinn.

With a massive Dull thud and a spray of molten rock that bounced

and ran off their shielding, the heat gun had created a large hole in the floor. “Looks like a long way down. We are really pushing our servos to the limit on this raid,” Claus reported.

“I don’t care if your servos give our and you have to walk back naked. Our prize is too close to give up,” retorted Alfinn.

Moments later their helmets were giving them a grainy green visual feed of a massive gladiatorial subterranean arena. Stripped and aged bones lined the ground everywhere.

“There at the end of the hall. A massive thermal and unknown energy reading,” remarked Edbjorn. Without a word the rest of the squad stared slowly crossing the massive open expanse carefully, powering up all their weapons and armour systems. After what seemed like an age the suits feed starting picking up a sound. A gentle wind was blowing past them.

“Easy. Don’t attack until we know what that thermal is,” whispered Alfinn into his helmet as his hammers powered up to full power, instantly illuminating the arena. Ahead of them a massive shaped stirred uncomfortably on a giant throne made of exotic otherworldly gemstones, its arcane machinery visible through multifaceted stones. “ORX WARLORD,” shouted Edbjorn, not even needing the helmet link to be heard. The warlord slowly rose from the throne, picking up a great lump of metal that has been beat into the rough shape of a sword and a massive pistol that seems lost in its massive hands.

“Why is it so big?” retorted Kjell. “Look at the throne. Who knows what secrets it holds. Now stop asking stupid questions and open fire; this beast isn’t going down quietly,” Alfinn shot back. Good to his word the warlord roared an intangible series of sounds and charged them, picking up massive speed in a short space. The squad opened up fire, ripping out huge chunks of flesh with their Hailstorm auto cannons and seared huge areas of flesh with heat cannons. “He isn’t slowing. Looks like we just made him angry,” spat Haftor moments before the warlord reached him.

The warlord hit him without a seconds thought, bullets bouncing off his force shield. The sword hit next, shorting out the force field

completely with a massive bang of pressurised air. Within seconds the warlord had Haftor in his hand, and had bitten his head clean off. Laughing the warlord looked round just in time for one of Alfinn's massive glowing hammers to hit him clean in the side of the face. Instantly half of the warlords face was incinerated as he stumbled back, Alfinn's second hammer connected with the monsters chest armour. The armour instantly melted and started running down the creatures flesh, burning it at the same time.

"Its wounded; open fire and don't let up," shouted Alfinn. The squad replied with the bark of auto cannons and whine of heat guns powering up and firing. Slowly but surely the creature dropped to one knee under the weight of fire the squad was dealing out. "Keep him occupied," Alfinn commanded as he crossed the room with a massive weapon started moving into position from his back. Slowly it moved to sit over his shoulder as the massive power plant in his armour began to shine a brighter and brighter shade of blue.

In an instant the whole room turned from blue to a brilliant white. everyone's helmet feed immediately shorted out. By the time their helmets rebooted, there was nothing left of the warlord. Just a molten pool of cooling rock. "Stick a teleport beacon on Haftor's body. We won't leave his body for the orx to chew on. Get a few beacons on that throne too. The rest of you get some lines up to the surface so we can get out of here and back to the forge ship," commanded Alfinn

Chapter 3

Making their way out of the temple, their hearts sank. Sitting right outside the doors in a massive circle surrounding them was every single orx on the planet. Raptors. Juggernauts. Ripper squads and stunt bots surrounded them at every turn. "OPEN FIRE ON ALL TARGETS!" shouted Alfinn, weapons whirring up to full power as they set their backs to the temple doors. Within moments they started hurling death at the orx forces, but it was soon apparent that they stood no chance as the orx war host began to charge. Within moments they would be overrun and hacked to death.

"Don't s'pose we can teleport out of here," retorted Godvar. "Doesn't work like that. The forge ship is now in the wrong position

for a teleport," Edbjorn replied curtly "However if you just wait a few more seconds, I have a way out of this mess." True to his word, a fleet of Rooks came in over the trees, opening fire with their auto cannons glowing red in the setting sun. One broke off from the attacking force and set down meters in front of the squad "In, quick. We have a payload ready to drop and detonate in less than a minute," shouted the pilot.

The squad scrambled into the Rook and immediately the Rook took off at speed and powered up its massive oversized engines boosting it into supersonic speeds. The Rook launched into the upper atmosphere as a second sun was created on the surface of the planet and every orx on the planet was wiped out in one single explosion. Edbjorn had his helm off and was speaking to the forge ship on the other side of the planet. "They have the throne in storage. The forge masters are quite confused. Its giving off some unusual energy readings. I've also just learned there are three incoming fleets of ships. At least one of them is Corporation, the other two we can't get readings on. We need to get back to the ship and get out of the planets gravity field to make a slip-space jump," he told Alfinn quietly.

The last of the Rooks start docking procedures. Looking out the view ports, the massive slab of green and tin colored metal sat like a great unwieldy predator, its massive weapons swivelling and moving into position to fight off the multiple enemies that were incoming. Its massive engines were starting their power cycles, the massive exhaust ports glowing brighter and brighter with the pent up power.

The Rook made for the docking deck straight away. As soon as they passed through the force field protecting the deck workers the massive metal shutters started sealing behind them as the last vacuum hissed off of the Rook's warm hole. As soon as the rook touched down the team made straight for the forge ships mighty bridge as claxons wailed and alarms pulsed on walls.

At the bridge Alfinn sat in his mighty throne, his armour instantly interacting with all of the ships systems, correcting errors, calculating a flight plan to the edge of the planet's gravity well, and setting up fire zones for all the ships mighty and ancient weapons all at once. "Prepare for sub light thrusters to fire. Inertial

dampeners active. All hands brace for ship to ship combat and immediate slip -activations," Alfinn spoke over the ships com system.

The ship lurched slowly, gaining momentum away from the green rock they had just been in orbit around. Within seconds more alarms were sounding. "Inbound FTL and slip-space signatures. We count 10 Corporation ships, 30 Marauder Orx ships, and 3 unknown ships showing some kind of infection among its crew. The Corporation flagship is hailing," stated a deckhand at a sensor panel.

"On screen," commanded Alfinn. The main view port turned to static, and then resolved into the image of an overly plump human "Forge father Huscarl. You are trespassing in Corporation space. You will be dealt with. power down your weapons and engines, and we will board you as soon as the plague and marauder threats are dealt with." The view screen cut out, and returned to the view of the expanse of space. "How long till we can make slip space at this speed?" asked Alfinn. "Two minutes," replied a deck hand.

"Cut power to the sub light engines, but keep the slip space engines active. Make the jump as soon as we hit that mark. Open up fire on any ship that gets within five thousand kilometers of us," commanded Alfinn as every ship in the fleet opened fire. Within seconds ships were turned into fiery graves, listing in every direction. The forge fathers shields start glowing under the weapon fire and massive chunks of debris glancing off of them. "Thirty seconds to jump. The Corporation cruisers are hailing us, demanding help, and there is a plague ship coming straight at us at speed," the deckhand at the sensor station remarked. "Open fire. Blast that hulk out of the way before it brings down the shields," Alfinn briskly commanded.

Every weapon on the forge ship was bought to bear on the plague's ancient corroded hulk. Massive Hailstorm mega cannons, heat lances, and giant torpedoes were launched at the plague hulk. Within seconds, there was nothing left in their way but small fragments of hull plating that harmlessly glance off the shields. "Slip space in three… two…one….."

End

‘Twas the Night Before Christmas

by Michael Grey

‘Twas the night before Christmas, And in every House and Conglomeration
Corporate espionage agents put into effect plans of anti-infiltration.

Departments chiefs were sleeping, tucked up sound in downy beds,
Dreams of spreadsheets, trends and profits running through their heads.

Agents oiled weapons, and guards checked security systems,
Because without fail, this time of year, they knew an attack would hit them.

It happens every December, on the night of the twenty fourth,
An enemy agent infiltrates the headquarters of the boss.

They know this wily agent, he arrives each year by sled.
He’s the best, and they know *he* knows it, because he taunts them by wearing red.

But this year they’re prepared. “That fat bastard won’t get through.
There’re magnetic locks and all the doors, and the roof is reindeer-proof.”

But then, roundabout midnight, when even spies are sleeping well,
Alarms are triggered, klaxons blare, and armed guards hit the stairwells.

“He’s coming through the heating ducts!” “Oh, not this time he’s not.”
And they’ll quickly set up ambush points, but no one will be caught.

You see, the fat man knows his business. He’s been doing this for years.
Nice things for the good children. For naughty, there’ll be tears.

So every year on Christmas morn, there’s a stocking for each CEO.

It’s sticky, it drips, it’s worse than coal. It’s the head of someone they know.

That’s why security chiefs scramble to catch him before he rides out of sight
On his reindeer-powered flyer, singing, “Ho ho ho, good night!”

For more stories like this, visit Michael’s blog at
www.michaelgrey.com.au

357

by John Hoyland

I
Shadows
Trinity
Swagger

It is night. More than this, it is that darkest part of night that has gathered many names to itself over the centuries. *Dead of night, the witching hour, the wee small hours*.

For the man standing in the shadows it is the *graveyard shift* and it is his time.

Humankind has always been scared of the dark. It's a primeval thing, a base-level instinct thing. It's the knowledge that the dark belongs to other creatures, other beings, more suited to its *mien* than the human has evolved to be. Humans are more on edge at night; they jump at noises, see shapes in shadows. Fear grows in their minds. The fight-or-flight response kicks in easily.

Over the centuries, humans have developed ways, technological as much as anything, of dealing with their lack of ownership of the night. The Marines of the Galactic Co-Prosperity Sphere, for example, have a wide array of gear available to them to turn night from enemy to ally. The humble rifleman has low-light goggles and an Im-Vis bio-scanner available to him on a personal level, but this is backed up by a dazzling array of scanners, sensors and other systems at battalion and battlegroup – and orbital fleet support – levels.

The man standing in the shadows has none of these things about him, at least not in a way that a rifleman of the Corporation would recognise them. Perhaps an Enforcer would be familiar with some of the gear available to the man in the shadows, but it would be in a limited way, the way a Stone Age man from Old Earth would recognise that a riot policeman's shock-maul is a weapon to bludgeon an enemy with.

The man in the shadows is invisible. Not in a ghost story way; he's not incorporeal. Nor in a fantasy story way; he's not hiding beneath some sort of cloak of invisibility. Look at him and you'll see him, sure enough. But no Immediate Vicinity bio-scanner – not even the high-spec stuff used by insertion teams or Enforcer strike teams – will light him up. Neither night-vision lens nor infrared equipment will pick him out of the darkness around him. The best trained sniffer hound might – *might* – get a hint of him, if the hound is having a particularly good day and the man in the shadows is having an off day.

The man in the shadows had an off day once. It was three years, seven months and twenty-two days ago.

No, you will not be aware of the man in the shadows. He, on the other hand, will be exactly and precisely aware of your location. He will be able to see you, to hear you, to smell you and, if he's here to kill you, he will be able to kill you.

Fortunately, the man in the shadows is not often sent to kill. This is a relief to him because, whilst he is very good at killing when he is called upon to do it, he finds it a rather distasteful thing to have to do.

The man in the shadows watches the empty goods yard in front of him. Slick, oily rain is hosing from the sky, dousing everything to its core and scattering gems of orange light around the yard; dancing reflections from the heavy night-lights that hang on great chains from the yard's gantries.

The man in the shadows waits.

He is aware of three others. They have been there since before he arrived. They're carrying military-grade rifles that have seen better days and they're watching the goods yard from elevated positions. They're there to provide cover to the ones who will arrive next. For gangers from the OutRing habitation zone, they're not bad at stealth. Not proficient, the man in the shadows considers, certainly not to the level that would be expected of the recon elements of the Corporation's armed forces, but used to operating quietly and at

night and therefore good enough to be of use to their fellow gangers.

The rest of the gang arrive. The man in the shadows heard their autos pulling up three minutes ago. They've made their way through the warehouses and office prefabs that surround the goods yard and now they're here.

They're armed to the teeth, mostly with older pattern AzFeq semi-autos and handguns from the Trans-Praal workshops. Decent kit. The man in the shadows has always considered the TP-17 to be one of the finest laser pistols manufactured anywhere in the Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The gangers fan out into a crescent facing the chain-link gates into the goods yard. The man in the shadows can smell the tension coming off them; they're ready for the meet to go horribly wrong. Some of them, he thinks, are *itching* for it to go wrong.

Everyone waits.

The man in the shadows hears three inaudible scuffs of noise in the space of two seconds. He jerks his head and looks to where one of the three covering gangers is secreted. He blinks twice, then half-closes his left eye for a moment. He does the same at the second man's position, then the third.

Interesting.

The man in the shadows looks to the goods yard's gates. For a moment all is still, bar the slashing rain and the dancing lights.

Then a fire-team inserts itself into the goods yard. It is a slick manoeuvre, rehearsed over and over and performed in as textbook a manner as any officer in any army anywhere could wish.

The gangers react to the fire-team by bringing weapons to bear. Energy cells hum from safe to active and trigger fingers begin to itch. The tension-musk coming off the gangers ramps up a notch.

From behind the fire-team a man strides into the goods yard. His

swagger is as confident as can be. His weapon remains very deliberately holstered. He halts, and lets the silence of the goods yard settle around him.

The man in the shadows can't help but raise an eyebrow, albeit only ever so slightly, as he realises the identity of the swaggering man. It is as close as the man in the shadows gets to revealing how surprising the swaggering man's presence here is. Given the swaggering man's identity, though, the presence of a highly professional fire-team becomes entirely unsurprising.

The man in the shadows blinks at the swaggering man, twitches both eyes, then blinks a couple more times. Images are captured and filed, though not yet transmitted. He clenches his jaw in a couple of significant places. Audio-capture begins.

After a pause so pregnant with tension that it seems someone's trigger finger *must* twitch, Swaggering man speaks.

"Come on Targuth! Let's do this."

Yes, Targuth, thinks the man in the shadows, *you should get on and do this.*

Targuth steps forward. He's a brute; easily the biggest man in the goods yard. Dreadlocks radiate from his head and his beard is forked in two. He's holding an AzFeq mk.II assault rifle casually in one paw and a massive two-handed fire-axe is balanced on his shoulder.

"Who ye comin' here usin' me true name?" he demands, his voice a rumble of thunder to accompany the rain. "Me has the gods on me side so make ye words polite."

"The gods?" asks Swaggering man, and the man in the shadows can hear the smile in his voice. "A trinity of them? Up on high? No. No you don't. They've deserted you. I've set my own gods up there to watch over us instead. And my gods are better than your gods."

Targuth growls and shakes his head, scattering rainwater from his dreads. The sight of it is like seeing some sort of feline alpha male

shake out its mane. Targuth turns to one of his gangers and hollers something at him in guttural gang speak. The ganger speaks into a two-way radio then shakes his head. Targuth turns angrily back to Swaggering man.

“Ye come here, kill me blood? This a speakin’ of make-peace and ye makin’ war! Ye can have war, if it war ye seek!”

Swaggering man shakes his head. “You don’t want that,” he says. “If this escalates, I can guarantee – *guarantee* – that not one of your boys will live and not one of my boys will die. But don’t worry! Your gods- huh, your *boys* aren’t dead. They’re just sleeping a little. They’ll have sore heads for a day or two, and it might be a week before they can remember what happened, but they’re not dead. So, let’s talk peace. And let’s talk pharmaceuticals.”

II
Of Names and Numbers
Dirt

“You’re absolutely, on-your-mother’s-virgin-honour, dead-as-a-frikkin’-doornail certain? I mean you’re *certain* certain it was him? Certain?”

The man in the shadows –

– No. He’s not in the shadows any more. He needs a name, a handle. Only he doesn’t currently have one. He was given a name at birth, as is the norm, and for the first twelve years of his life it served him admirably, but when he caught the eye of the Office and became an agent thereof, that name ceased to apply to him. Since beginning work for the Office he has had a number of names, but his current assignment doesn’t warrant the use of one and so he doesn’t have one. He is currently – and it should be stressed that this is only true for the duration of this operation – he is currently Agent 357. The number has absolutely no significance; he was not known as Agent 357 prior to this operation and he will, in all probability, never be known as Agent 357 again after its completion. It is an entirely randomly generated number. When Agent 357 is debriefed after this operation and assigned to a new one, there will be no record anywhere to link his new name or

number to the number to which he is currently assigned.

Agent 357 nods in answer to his handler's question. Or rather, questions. Or rather, the same question asked three times.

"Of course you're certain," says his handler. "Of course you are. Crap. Crappety crap-crap-crap." Agent 357's handler raises his styrene coffee cup to his lips, realises he's jittering too much to take a swig right now, and places the cup back on the table.

By contrast, Agent 357 sips his coffee calmly.

"Okay," says his handler. "Okay. Er…" He sighs, shakes his head. "Crap. Okay. Thanks. Right. Thanks, good, uh, you did good. Successful mission, all, uh, all objectives fulfilled. Uh. Get, get some rest. I'll take this back to the Office and, uh, crap, someone will be in touch. Usual drill. You know how it works."

Agent 357 nods, sips the last of his coffee, stands, turns, and leaves the coffee house.

"Crap," mutters Agent 357's handler, rolling his eyes at the ceiling. "A dirty Chief of Staff. Why do *I* have to get the dirty Chief of Staff?"

III
A Long Shot
Pretty Serious Allegations

Sector Chief of Staff Victor Olborro is old blood. His family line goes all the way back. Some of the first to settle off-world. Some of the first to leave Old Earth behind and start a new life. Olborro's ancestors were frontiersmen in a sense that humankind had never known before.

Admittedly, they were frontiersmen with palaces and private armies, which seemed to go somewhat against the spirit of the pioneers Olborro had read about in histories of pre-Settlement, when humankind was still bound to Old Earth, but the Olborro line is one that traces itself back to the early days of the frontier, and that is what counts in Olborro's book.

Victor Olborro is a tall man with broad, powerful shoulders and a stomach turning from muscular to flabby, but he bears himself well. When he walks, he walks with a swagger. Millions of Marines are his to command – armies vastly bigger than anything his frontiersman ancestors could have imagined – but he feels no pressure at this, only pride in his place, in his achievements. He has his secrets – of course he does; what man doesn't? – but they're buried so deep even the Council of Seven would struggle to unearth them. He also feels no compunction whatsoever that he has hung several friends out to dry in order to keep those secrets buried. He feels the occasional tinge of sadness that his brother-in-law was executed by spacing for trafficking pharms, but more because spacing is a dishonourable way to go than because an innocent man died. Spacing is for common criminals, not for the highborn.

Victor Olborro is currently lying on his belly in dense undergrowth, a Long cradled in his hands. It's been near two decades since he served with a recon platoon and picked up the habit of referring to a sniper rifle simply as a 'Long,' but it's a reference that's never left him.

He's hunting now, putting all those sniper-skills to good use, but his quarry is big game, not an enemy fighter. He has a kylosaurid in his sights, centred, and conditions are perfect for the shot, but he's not taking it yet. He wants it to move away; just about four more metres, and then he'll take the shot. The reason is pure vanity; four more metres and the shot will be a personal record distance and, therefore, an Officers' Club record too. It will win him a small but significant amount of money.

The kylosaurid's head comes up; it's got a scent. Prey of its own to track. It swings its head from side to side, flaring its ultra-sensitive nostrils as it does so.

Olborro loves hunting kylosaurid. They're such damned sophisticated predators that, if you make even the tiniest error when tracking one, chances are high you'll suddenly find that you're the prey. And you'd better make damned sure your first shot is a kill shot.

Olborro's kylosaurid has homed in on its prey; in a moment will come a sudden burst of speed as the creature sprints into the forest. Then, very likely, some lumbering herd beast will die.

It looks like the angle of the beast's run will take it away from Olborro, which will give him the extra distance he needs to win the bet, but it will also make the shot so much harder; a kylosaurid's acceleration from a standing start is phenomenal.

Olborro allows himself a smile; the distance and the speed will only add to the kill's prestige.

The kylosaurid moves. There's a tell that Olborro knows to watch for, just before it happens; a shivering of leg muscles as they bunch in preparation.

The shiver comes, the kylosaurid springs from a standing start to a run and Olborro fires.

The shot is perfect. The jagged pulse of laser energy pierces the kylosaurid's skull just above and behind its right eye. The bone there is thinner and the shot splinters it and slices through the brain, instantly severing the brains' commands to limbs. The kylosaurid crashes to the ground with a thump that Olborro can feel, even from this distance. It's a quick, clean kill, an honourable end for the beast.

Olborro checks that the targeting computer on his Long has recorded the details of the shot, then mutters, "Shame there's no good eating on a kylosaurid."

Then he rolls suddenly to his back, sidearm leaping from its holster, and centres the sights on the man standing over him.

"Getting better, Kul," he says. "Nearly had me."

Kul, who flinched when his commander turned his pistol on him, recovers his composure quickly enough and holds out a palmbook to the Sector Chief of Staff.

"A fine shot, sir," he says as Olborro holsters his weapon and takes

the palmbook. “Very fine.”

Olborro sits up and flicks a finger across the palmbook to light it up. The screen that greets him is security encrypted but there aren’t many clearance levels denied to a Sector Chief. He scans the information that presents itself upon retinal identification.

“Pretty serious allegations,” he says.

“Indeed so, sir,” agrees Kul.

Olborro rises smoothly to his feet. “I’d best question him myself.”

IV
Accusations
A Loss of Honour

The room is as sound-sealed as a room can be. Nothing can possibly get in or out, unless comms are activated. Even then, if they’re not officially sanctioned comms, the periodic sensor sweeps will pick them up and raise the alarm.

It’s also as bland as these rooms always are. Dull metallic walls, a dull metallic table, a pair of dull metallic chairs and one wall taken up by a one-way mirror. Victor Olborro sits in one of the dull metallic chairs and Colonel Stephan Holst sits in the other. Holst bears himself well, but there’s fear around the eyes. He knows where this conversation is going to go.

“It all looks as cut-and-dried as it could be, Colonel,” says Olborro. “There’s no point you trying to wriggle out of it, it would demean us both for you to deny your crimes. So just tell me why. And tell me who else I should space.”

Holst’s eyes twitch at the mention of spacing. “If I am to be executed, let it be as an officer,” he says.

“You’re not denying it then?” Olborro asks, flicking one eyebrow slightly.

“As you said, sir, there would be no point. Whoever has set me up

has done it so well that – your words – there's no way I can wriggle out of it."

"Set you up? That's quite an allegation."

"Sir, with all due respect, I don't want to play this game. Yes, I have been set up, no, I don't know who did it and yes, I realise I'm a dead man. So please, can we just get on with it? Only, I repeat my request that my execution be by firing squad, not by spacing. I have never stained the honour of my rank, I would ask you to preserve that honour in the manner of my execution."

Olborro sits back in his chair and folds his arms across his chest.

"Suspend vocal recording," he says to the air.

++Identification required++ announces an automated voice, issuing from unseen speakers in the walls.

"Identification: Victor Olborro, Sector Chief," says Olborro, his tone bored.

++Verified++ says the automated voice. ++Vocal recording suspended. Time marked++

"The man Targuth. Your supplier. Tell me how we get to him and I'll see that your death is honourable," he tells Holst.

"I never met the man," says Holst. "I didn't even know such an individual existed until I read the dossier your people had me read."

Olborro shrugs with his eyes. "You don't help me, I can't help you," he says.

Holst grits his teeth. He's afraid, and fear isn't a feeling he's used to. "Then so help me you'll have to space me," he says, "Because I swear, on my mother's life, on my *own* life, for all that's worth now, that I have absolutely no idea who this *Targuth* is, nor have I been in any way involved in any form of drugs trafficking either recently or at any point in my life."

Olborro smiles, though it is an empty smile. “If I had only your word as an officer – and one I trust and value at that – I would believe you. Truly I would, but…” he taps the dossier on the table. “…I can’t deny this.”

“As I said, *Sir*,” The word has an edge to it. An edge that suggests Holst no longer means it as an honorific, “I don’t want to play this game. Your decision has clearly been made. Carry out the sentence.”

For the briefest moment Olborro looks irritated. “Very well.” He sits forward in his chair now and orders the vocal recording to resume.

++Vocal recording resumed. Time marked++ says the voice.

“Colonel Stephan Holst,” says Olborro, his tone official now, no trace of comradeship lacing it. “You are to be tried for drugs trafficking, individual charges to be laid out clearly at such time as your trial commences. Should you found guilty – and such an outcome seems inevitable – you will be taken from this place into orbit via interplanetary shuttle and from said shuttle you will be executed by spacing. Before sentence is carried out, you will be stripped of rank and title and your military pension will be denied your family. Interview ends.”

V
Judgement

Agent 357 hears every word of the interview, sensor sweeps or no. He hears every word of the trial too.

And then he receives his orders. They are distasteful to him; he doesn’t like being an agent of death.

But Victor Olborro will die and it will be by his hand.

VI
Shuttle Run
The Laughter Stops Dead

The shuttle pushes heavenward on hunched, wide engines. It’s an

outdated model, a reliable old packhorse kept on for menial work when it perhaps should have been put out to pasture. Menial work like ferrying supplies to the orbiters or shipping out spares to work crews servicing satellites.
Or taking prisoners to their place of execution.

The cargo bay, a modular design that can easily be fitted for any number of purposes, is currently filled by a back-to-back bench, two rows of twelve chairs, complete with mag-lock cuffs welded to the armrests. Twenty-one of the chairs are filled by military personnel of various ranks, the most senior of whom is Colonel Stephan Holst, although there is no way of telling who holds what rank because the soldiers have all been stripped entirely naked. In execution there is nothing to distinguish private soldier from commissioned officer.

The twenty-one soldiers have been described by the court martial and by the press as ‘associates’ and ‘accomplices’ in a drug-trafficking ring worth millions. The reality is that none of them have ever met each other and this has been claimed by the prosecution as a very deliberate move on the part of Holst – keeping his crew away from each other on all military books – in order to make their movements much more difficult to track. That they have been brought to justice is being hailed as a great achievement for – and indeed by – military intel.

They are all of them innocent of the crimes for which they are soon to be executed.

One or two of them are in tears. Several of them simmer with anger. Most of them are numb to it, unable still to comprehend how this has been so thoroughly pinned on them.

All of them are entirely impotent to do anything about their situation.

The shuttle is reaching the upper atmosphere now, and the condemned men and women can feel to effects of gravity on them beginning to lessen.
Not long now.

The thrum of those powerful engines dies back. The vibration running through every surface of the shuttle lessens until it is nothing more than a series of short, sharp shudders as vector thrusters manoeuvre the shuttle into its marked coordinates.

The shuttle has a crew of four. Not one of them has at any point been heard over the intercom. The last voice heard by any of the condemned, or at least the last voice from outside of the cargo hold, was planetside. It was the voice of the officer in charge of the execution party wishing them, in deeply ironic tone, a comfortable ride.

The lights dim.

A red light flashes into life. It marks death.

One of the men, a young soldier – a boy really – lets a sob escape his lips.

“Can that, soldier,” orders Holst, though not unkindly. “Remember who you are. No fear. Even in the face of death.”

A pause.

“Sorry sir,” the boy soldier manages it without a quiver.

“No reprimand this time soldier. Don’t let it happen again.”

The boy soldier laughs. The irony of the joke is not lost on him. The laughter takes hold of him and several of the others pick it up. Gallows humour, it’s as old as humankind.

There’s a hydraulic clank. A hissing rush of air. The laughter stops dead.

VII
A View to a Kill

The viewing deck of the grand cruiser *Seraiah* is serene. Its armor plates are drawn back to allow the vista of space to drift overhead. The agri-world of Lanwar’s Fields fills much of the starboard view,

the String Nebula lazily wafting behind it and off to portside.

Victor Olborro is watching neither the planet nor the nebula. He's watching a shuttle slow itself to a standstill, taking up a geosynchronous orbit alongside the cruiser. Olborro stands at ease, hands clasped gently behind his back. He is in full dress uniform. His aide, Kul, is alongside him.

An electronic chime warbles.

"That's the cue, sir," mutters Kul, fully aware that Olborro knows what the alarm signals.
Perfectly on cue, the shuttle's cargo bay doors begin to open. *Like the petals of a flower opening to the sun's warmth*, thinks Olborro. A haze of air jets free and dissipates into space.

Then the bodies begin to emerge. And they are indeed no more than bodies by this time: For all that spacing is a death reserved for common criminals, it is a quick death. The moment the bay doors are opened and the cold of the void gets in, those being executed are dead. It takes only seconds.

From this distance, Olborro has no way of telling which of the bodies is Holst; they're clearly human and clearly naked, but beyond that, the distance is too great. It's difficult even to tell the sex of the bodies at this distance, but Olborro knows full well that seventeen of them are men and four of them are women.

He knows this because he is the one who set them up.

He watches in silence as the bodies disperse. Alongside him, Kul tries his best to keeps his eyes on the view, but he can't help but glance at Olborro every so often. Now and again his jaw twitches with tension. *Damn, but Victor Olborro is a cold-hearted bastard!*

Eventually, Kul coughs politely.

"Yes?" Olborro's eyes don't stray from the vista before him.

"Sir, with all due respect, I have a great deal to do."

“Of course. Carry on.”

Kul clicks his heels together and snaps off a salute. He waits for a moment to see if Olborro will return it. When he doesn’t, Kul turns smartly on his heel and marches from the viewing deck.

On the whole, executions sicken him.

VIII
Of Gunboats and Strong Drink
Video Evidence

Sector Chief of Staff Victor Olborro is the most powerful man for several hundred light years in any given direction. Nominally, he holds the Naval rank of Admiral and the Army have accorded him the rank of Field Marshal. He sits on the Executive Board of the Office of Internal Security. Legions of Marines are his to command. Enforcers are almost certain to answer any call he makes. Frigates, gun-boats, grand cruisers, hunt/kill drones, orbital defence platforms… all these things make war at his bidding.

And all of these things are about to become entirely useless to him.

His doorbell chimes. He places the tumbler of one-hundred-and-twenty year-old fodk delicately back on the side-table next to his favourite leather chair.

“Identify,” he tells the air.

++Visitor is Chief Aide Lieutenant Kul++ the computer tells him.

“Admit.”

The door to Olborro’s quarters slides open. It looks to be mahogany but isn’t. It’s such a good likeness though that he has never yet met anyone who has spotted that it’s a fake.

Kul enters. “Sorry to disturb you, sir,” he says. “Palmbook, sir. Just up from planteside. High-spec courier drone. Marked for immediate attention.”

Olborro motions for Kul to hand him the palmbook and lights it up once it's in his hand. It jumps immediately to a looped vid-feed.

Olborro sits motionless. His jaw clamps tight. Fear and anger light up his eyes. The anger soon fades though.

The fear remains.

He is still still.

"Sir?"

Olborro does not reply. He can't take his eyes off the screen.

IX
A Very Proficient Technician

The technician strolls along the corridor, boredom sloughing off him almost palpably. There's a broken slot machine in the private rec room of Sector Chief of Staff Victor Olborro's handpicked bodyguard. Perish the thought that Olborro's elite should have to spend an evening devoid of their slot machine.

The technician reaches the rec room, sniffs to clear his nose and puts a palm to the key-screen. It lights up green and the door slides open. Several of Olborro's kill-team turn to look at the technician, but other than the odd muttered, 'about time,' no-one pays him much attention. They're all amusing themselves in other ways. Cards, smokes, vidbooks.

This suits the technician perfectly. He opens his kit-bag and pulls out a snub-nosed LiG-3 semi-automatic. There is no more compact semi-auto to be found in the GCPS, or at least none half so good.

By the time any of Olborro's kill-team realise what the tool is that the technician has pulled from his kit-bag, it's too late.

Agent 357 is utterly efficient in his movements. The LiG-3 spits laser death at each and every man in the room, white-hot bolts of energy lancing through victim after victim, cauterising perfectly punctured holes through each one. The only sound is the *zipzipzip* of

the LiG-3 and the thud of bodies crumpling to the floor. Not one man manages even to shout out.

Agent 357 deactivates the LiG-3's power cell, places the weapon back in the kit-bag and, as bored as he was when he entered the room, the technician leaves.

And heads towards the quarters of Sector Chief of Staff Victor Olborro.

X
Paralysis
A Switch of Perspective
A Disparate Group of Disillusioned Fools

"Sir?"

Olborro still hasn't moved. Sweat has broken out on his forehead and a vein in his neck is throbbing.

"Gnnnhh…" he says. Surprise lights his eyes at this and he tries to look up at Kul. He can't. He's suddenly almost paralysed.

With an effort of will, he manages to look up at his Aide.

"Whunnhhh..?" he says.

"Sir?" asks Kul again, concern worrying at his features.

And then he smiles.

"Oh," he says. "Can't move? Can't talk? Well that really is a shame."

Olborro's eyes frown.

"You're dying, *Sir*," grins Kul, managing to make the title into an insult. "It's going to take a while and it's going to hurt. Someone – and I genuinely have no idea who, although we work for the same organisation – has added a serum to your fodk and it's a particularly unpleasant mix. There's enough of the stuff that's paralysing you in there – I forget its name, it's alien anyway – to

drop a teraton, but the adrenalin mixed with it should keep you conscious through it all. Your heart rate is going to keep increasing until your body can't take it. First capillaries, then veins, then arteries will burst under the strain. You'll sort of, *pop*, I suppose. I'm not sure what it will look like, truth be told. I've never seen it happen. I'm intrigued. Morbid, I know, but there you have it."

Kul checks his wristpiece. "We've got a minute or so yet, I think, so allow me to indulge myself, will you?

"There's an agent on his way here. The Office of Internal Security have assigned him the number three-five-seven for this operation. He's got no idea that you're already dying and that he really needn't bother, and he's got no idea that he's going to die when he gets here, but there we are. I'm going to kill him, you see. Oh, he's fantastically good – one of the very best I've ever seen. The Office should be very proud of him. I'm sure they are, in fact – but I'm better. A boast, I know, but it's true. And the thing that should really, *really* worry you about that is that I don't work for the Office. I don't work for any department of the GCPS."

Kul leans in close to Olborro's ear. "I'm a *Reb*," he whispers.

He straightens. "That's what you call us, isn't it, in your disdain? Rebs? Suitably informal. Suitably loose. Makes it easy to persuade the populous that we're just a bunch of freedom fighters, with no particular agenda or politics. Just a disparate group of disillusioned fools.

"But the truth is, the *truth* is, we're far more organised than you know and we go far, far higher than you know. All the way to the very top. Do you think I could possibly know the identity of the Office agent on his way here if we didn't have a mole right at the very top feeding us information? For that matter, do you think we could run an organisation modelled on the Office – only far, far better at its job – without inside help? Too bad for you that there's not a damned thing you can do with the information I'm giving you. Because you're dead. Did I mention that already? I did? Oh. Well, there we go.

"Anyway, time presses. Agent 357 will be here any second now.

Better make ready hadn't we?"

Kul pull his sidearm and screws a flash suppressor to the barrel.

The door chimes.

XI
An Agent of the Office
Exit Wounds
So Long and Farewell

Agent 357 palms the key-screen outside Olborro's office. Ordinarily, the palm-print of a lowly technician wouldn't be anywhere near enough to open the door to the private quarters of a Sector Chief, but Agent 357 is only one of a number of agents working the Olborro case and another of the team has made sure the door will slide open at his request. It's a very sophisticated piece of work.

357 has the Lig-3 in his hands and raises it to his shoulder as the door slides open.

Chief Aide Lieutenant Kul is pointing a pistol at Sector Chief Victor Olborro's head. Agent 357 isn't expecting this. He switches the Lig-3's aim to Kul, momentarily uncertain.

"Whoa there, three-five-seven! Easy, easy!" says Kul quickly, raising his hands and opening up his grip on his pistol to show he's no threat. "I'm Office, I'm Office! I'm going to reach for my ident, nice and steady like."

A flicker of suspicion twitches at Agent 357's eyes.

"Gnnnhhh!" slurs Olborro urgently from his chair. 357 throws a momentary glance at him, taking in the purple face, the throbbing veins, the fear and pain in the eyes.

It's all the distraction Kul needs. In the swiftest of movements he levels his pistol at Agent 357 and squeezes the trigger. Three tiny needles of metal squirt from the barrel and pierce Agent 357's chest. No sooner have they encountered the solid mass of his chest than the points blossom into flower, shredding internal organs and

tearing flesh. The exit wounds they leave are monstrous.

Even 357's preternatural reactions aren't quick enough for him to be able to return fire. He drops noiselessly, suddenly nothing more than so much meat.

"Depressingly easy," mutters Kul. He looks at Olborro. The Sector Chief's hands are a mess; they're blood-blistered from fingertip to wrist and the dark mass of burst vessels below the skin is moving up his arms, vanishing beneath the sleeves of his uniform. "Not long now, I think," he says. He takes a business card from his pocket and holds it up in front of Olborro. "I'm not honestly sure if you can read this," he says, "Given the state of your eyes" – the Sector Chief's eyeballs are bright red – "But I wanted you to see it anyway. I'll leave it here." He places it on the side table, next to Olborro's bottle of fodk. "Time for me to take my leave, I think."

Kul holsters his sidearm and turns to go. "It's been a pleasure," he says. "An absolute *pleasure*. At least, in the last few minutes it has.

"I'd say 'farewell' but I think the chances of you faring well are slim." He cocks his head to one side, considering. "We'll settle for 'so long.'" he says.

And leaves.

XII
Business Card

It isn't until the next day that anyone notices the absence of Olborro, Kul or Olborro's bodyguard team. When the security detail sent to search Olborro's suite force the door to his quarters open they find a very, very messily dead Sector Chief of Staff.

They also find a business card.

It reads, simply, '*The Maelstrom is coming*.'

Starkiron Tony

by Darren Lysenko

The following text was taken from "Starkiron Tony - The Unauthorised Biography" by Nick Rather-Cross:

"I'll be damned if Tony wasn't the best of his generation, the most promising Dreadballer I ever saw. Nobody had the moves, nobody had the speed, nobody had the *imagination*, that he did. He could walk into the arena and hell, even his opponents would cheer him. I was proud to have known him. We were friends.

But then it happened, like it always happens to any arena-jock with a little bit of class. You know the ones - the guys and girls who stand just that bit taller than the rest of their team. The team gets a stiff neck looking up at them, and they make enemies.

Same thing happened in his last days playing for the *MarvelCorp Millionaires*. And yeah, like it always happens, it started with a girl.

Well, okay, it started with a Ref-Bot.

Her name was Reffer-Botts and she had the kinda black-chrome sheen that could make microprocessors fizz and a hammered-steel shell so hot it'd make even a Judwan look twice..."

The author goes on to say:

"Starkiron Tony threw it all away for the love of a robot, a damned robot. Soon after they got it together, Tony was booted from the *Millionaires*. Sure, it helped that Botts turned a blind eye to every dirty trick and sleight that the *Millionaires* pulled, but having Tony mooning over that mechanized harlot and - on at least two occasions - stopping games mid-flow to declare his love for her over the PA system, turned the team into a laughing stock. In the end, the rest of them were glad to see him go."

In the final chapters, Nick Rather-Cross muses upon the second phase of Starkiron Tony's career:

"The *Starkiron Tonys* might well have been his last throw of the dice. After his firing from the *Millionaires,* no other team would take him - at least not for the credits he was asking for. And so now he stands, the last of his fortune and hopes poured into his eponymous team - their armor patched and battered, but the best he could afford. Beside him, as always - on the pitch and off - stands Miss Reffer-Botts.

Do I think he'll make it? I think he might.

Does *he*?

I asked him that once. He told me:

"Man, I'm unstoppable. I'm like molten metal. I'm fluid, I'm malleable and I absolutely *can not be broken.* I'm iron, man."

"Starkiron Tony - The Unauthorised Biography" by Nick Rather-Cross will be available for direct cerebral download this Fall.

Saga of Shard Sea

by Andre Evans

Lt Hawke looked over the edge of the trench at the oncoming mass. The trench network here had been hastily dug at the beginning of the conflict to give cover to civilians as they were loaded into the transports ships to take them across the shard sea. In the beginning, there was only a token force, something for the civvies to see, make it look like they were a priority. The brass had stationed 95% of their force surrounding the mountain ranges. They had monitored the pods landing on the planet, and assured all forces it would be easily contained within the ranges. How wrong they were.

'The fools' he thought, spitting into the dirt at his feet. Looking at the mass of bodies ahead of him one last time, he turned to his men.

"Gentlemen, this is not a good situation we are in." He looked along the assembled men in front of him. He didn't sit well with the weight of command, but for the 43rd, he was the highest ranking officer. This meant he had to step forward, and do what needed to be done.

"In fact," he took off his helmet "The situation is dire, worse than dire." He shook his head for moment, clearing his mind. There had been 50 divisions transferred to the planet, and now, the remains of the last 7 were holed up here covering the last civilians onto the transports. The spaceport was on the other side of the ocean, and the mining operations were all based down around it. They were basically leaving the upper continent to the invaders, and the sea was going to stop them getting to the lower continent. The military was just there to protect the civilians, the workforce. He muttered a few curses to himself, before looking up at the assembled men once more.

"We have to hold this line, we need to finish evacuating the civilians. They are the priority, not us. We signed up for this life, and if we need to, we will give ours to let them get on those boats. We need to hold off these bastards for an hour, and then we need to

evacuate ourselves on the landing craft when it returns." he saluted the soldiers "may the council smile on us, and prepare to give everything. Now, load up, and get to your positions." He turned, and stepped onto the firing step, facing the oncoming onslaught.

22 minutes later, hell had certainly descended on them. He lost count the number of insectoid bodies they had accounted for. The line was holding, for now at least. The civilians had all been taken, now they were waiting for their transport. To return. Hawke stepped down to reload his pistol, wipe the ichor and sweat from his face. The bodies of his men laying around the trench, mercifully, most were dead. The corpsmen were treating some, evacuating the others to the port ramp, waiting. He watched some corpsmen scurrying down from the 18th further along the trench network.

"Corpsmen, how are you holding?" He asked wearily. His body was sore, his arm was trembling. He felt like it had been going on for days rather than minutes. He only knew he had to keep going, to keep fighting.

"We've been hurt hard Lt. The 23rd and 25th are effectively gone. Cut off from the rest of us, massive casualties. Last communication we had said they were lost, and count them out for evac. The docks are over flowing with wounded, and the ships still haven't responded." The corpsmen shook his head "Sir, its not going well, if the transports don't arrive soon, were done for."

"Okay, thank you Corpsman, get the wounded safe." Hawke watched the soldiers take the stretcher they were carrying down the trench, before turning to his communications officer. The soldier looked worse than he did, a chemical burn on one side of his face, and his arm in a sling. He the officer still held his sidearm, and was still fighting alongside them all.

"Comms, get on the combat network, I want to know who's in charge now." Hawke ducked instinctively as an explosion went off behind him.

"On it Sir." The officer turned to use his comms equipment while Hawke stepped back onto the firing step, and began blasting into the horde once more. They came in waves, and for ever wave they

turned back, infinite numbers of others remained. The soldiers around him fired in well ordered drills, the heavy weapons mounted behind them blasting onto the oncoming mobs where they fighting was thickest. They were still holding, they could do this he thought.

"Sir, combat network HQ on the line, transferring it to your ear only Sir." The comms officer said through his earpiece as the clicking line suddenly cleared.

"Combat HQ, Major Koon here. Identify."

"Lt Hawke Sir, authorization TBL4. Requesting status update as to command chain."

"Confirmed Lt, checking lifemonitor readings now." Seconds later, the line spoke again "You are the command chain Lt, promotion approved, your rank is now Captain. You have command of our ground forces. Congratulations Captain."

"Affirmative, request information regarding transport status."

"Transport is 6 minutes out, will dock for 2 minutes only. Get all onboard in that time you can. Transport to space port will be about 11 hours."

"Confirmed. Lt..... cancel. Confirmed Capt Hawke. Out."

Hawk heard the line go cold in his ear. He stepped down off the step, and began issuing withdrawal orders through the combat network. He then watched the troops further out the trench system running past, moving to the docks to take up the last line positions. Soon, he ordered his own men, and the subsequent units to fall back. As the transport pulled into the dock, the injured were all ready to go. 1 minute later the majority of the forces were onboard, he looked across at the remains of the trench network. He had decided one division would have to stay to cover the transport leaving, the remains of the 4th had volunteered for the duty, and he had insisted they keep the fast inflatables to try to save who they could. He knew by reputation the 4th would be willing to sacrifice themselves to keep the dock free if needed.

The transport began to pull away as the attackers began pressing into the dock, when the main transports was 20 meters out he watched the remaining troops of the 4th running to the inflatables and bolting from the shore. The swarm behind them began swamping the dock area, their bodies falling into the sea when they began flailing around. The troops covering the dock from the transport deck fired into the mass, but Hawke swiftly ordered them to stop, they might need every round before the dày was through.

The inflatables were pulled onto the ship, the wounded were being treated, and they began the long crossing to the spaceport. Hawke turned back to see the insectoid horde had stopped. There were still a few sounds of gunfire from troops who had been cut off, or injured who refused to leave their posts. Effectively, they had been beaten, soundly.

He turned to step down from the edge of the ship when something caught his eye. Across the dock the insects were tearing apart the bodies of the fallen soldiers, but just off the centre of the line there was a person. It was the shape of a man, looked like a man, but was unmistakably alien. It was stood, staring at him. If it didn't look so alien, Hawke would have said it had been studying him as he was studying it.

He turned away from the alien body, and went to look at the forces that remained under his command. He knew if they were to survive this, they would have to fight harder than they had before. The enemy were completely alien to them all, and the tactics they had learnt would need to be refined. They couldn't afford to be beaten again.

***

The alien stood amongst its brethren, hearing the clicking of the others as they began to strip all the biomatter from the flesh aliens. They had a quota to fulfill if their queen was to prosper on this planet. The central water area in the planetary body would delay them, but it would not stop them. It listened to the sounds from its brethren, hearing in their sounds the excitement of having matter to return to their queen. He began to move through the throng of the

others, before stopping, and looking down at one of the bodies. It was a soft flesh construct, clad in a limited protective layer. He looked at the drones, fulfilling their duties, while the observers like him moved through the mob.

He knew that the planet would be taken eventually, and that was all he could have hoped for. For the drones with their lack of will, the overseers, the observers, even the queen herself, they would survive, they would grow. the empire of the Zz'or swarm would take all.

The Ambush

A Mars Attacks tale

by Rob Allen, aka "Briohmar"

"This patrol has been an easy one," thought Sergeant Bryan McCain. "Haven't seen a single brainy the whole day. Not even any of that weird stuff that's been reported by other patrols. Giant flying bugs — yeah, right!" Sergeant First Class McCain and his platoon, if you could call it that, were tasked to head deep into Greenville to link up with two civilian survivors who were in possession of some possibly significant intel.

The patrol reached the link-up with no problem and found the two civvies, a punk kid named Troy, and a police officer called Eva. Eva had several objects in her knapsack, though she didn't show them to Sergeant McCain. Neither did she or Troy tell him what they knew that was important enough for him to risk his men to bring them in. "Well, as my friend Rob in the S-2 always reminds me, intel is on a need to know basis. Guess I don't need to know."

With just over a klick and a half to go until they were back inside the lines, Bryant started to relax. His men did as well. SGT Sherer had eased his SAW down from a constant high ready, to an easy-slung position. SPC Davis started humming tunelessly to himself. even Craigs up at point had started moving less cautiously.

"Dammit! This ain't right," thought Bryan. "We're close to home without contact. I've seen this before where we get too cocky and something goes wrong." He called his men to a halt, and reminded them, "Boys, we're still in dangerous country. Remember that patrol from deuce-four last week got zapped within sight of the wire. Stay sharp! Be alert!"

"The Army needs all the 'lerts we can get these days," he added humorously, to the chuckles of his men.

Bryan wasn't really kidding at all. When the invasion started, his platoon was deployed to Greenville along with the rest of the 1st

Stryker Brigade Combat Team. When they arrived, SFC McCain had 32 able Soldiers, including a lieutenant in his platoon. He was now down to seven able to go out on patrol. Four were down due to combat injuries but would be back to duty within the next week or so. All but one of the Strykers was damaged beyond repair as well. It was just as well. Bryan knew that any time a Stryker rolled out into the war zone, the saucers would descend on it and shred it, killing all aboard. He had even heard that the brainies had a giant robot which had reportedly picked up a Stryker and ripped it in half. He wasn't sure he believed that little tale just yet, but with these advanced enemies, anything was possible.

"Enough reflection; focus on the mission, dammit!" he told himself. That was the real issue wasn't it: the mission. Getting these two civvies back to the FOB had somehow gone really smoothly. He wondered where the brainies were. Usually, about two kilometers in, you found at least a Martian patrol, but on this one, nothing. "Where'd they all go?"

"ZZZAAAP!!!!"

"Well, hell! I guess that answered that question." Without warning, the air around the patrol started exploding with disintegration rays. God how he hated those things. They could reduce a building to ruins in short order, and a direct hit would leave a man either in pieces, or simply gone without a trace except for some ashes and dust. "Everyone take cover!" Bryan shouted. It was a moot point as the guys he had with him were all veterans now, and they did so without thinking. The lead team jumped behind the ruined walls of what appeared to have once been a store. He and the rest jumped behind a wall as well. "Second squad, get over to the right and watch for any brainies trying to maneuver up on us." The first squad was already laying down some fire; they had even hit one of the brainies so far. But damn! There's a lot of 'em.

The brainies started moving in on his right flank; half a dozen of them ran across the street into the ruined buildings. "SGT Sherer, get your guys over there and keep them from flanking us!" Bryan yelled.

Sherer shouted out, "Follow me, boys!" and started maneuvering to

cut them off. He made it to the cover on the other side of the road as did Davis, but not Griggs. Half way across, a freeze ray shot down the road and stopped him dead in his tracks.

Rapid firing from Craigs and Smitty had taken down three more brainies as they maneuvered up on the first squad's position. Suddenly, Bryan heard a strange droning sound coming from nearby. He turned to find the source, thinking maybe it was one of those damned saucers. He knew how to take them down, though. To his abject horror, a strange creature dropped from the sky, grabbed Smitty in a crab-like claw, and flew off. As they passed overhead, Bryan could hear Smitty screaming, but all he could do was think, "Damn! There really are giant, mutant bugs after all."

As he returned to his senses, he realized about five Martians were trying to cross the road where the first squad couldn't see them. "Legion 5-2, this is Bulldog 2-6. Immediate suppression tango romeo papa 1-3. Danger close, over," he shouted into his radio. He was gratified to hear, "Bulldog 2-6, this is Legion 5-2. Immediate suppression tango romeo papa 1-3. Danger close, out." Then three seconds later he heard the familiar whistle of incoming mortar rounds.

BOOM! Two more Martians dropped to the ground, hopefully never to rise again. Sherer had three of them by him, one just on the other side of the wall. He pulled out his knife and dove over the ruined building, slashing the brainy three times. The other two responded almost immediately, rushing him almost as one. He took down a second, but the third got the drop on him. As Davis saw his sergeant go down, he spun into action, spraying down the Martian with his M4 carbine. The brainy dropped after being riddled with bullets. Just as he was moving to see if Sherer needed help, a freeze ray blasted down the street, and Davis was no more.

When Bryan met these two, he was duly unimpressed. A lady cop and a punk kid in street clothes. What could they possibly know that was so important? He introduced himself and the members of his squad as their 'escorts to the ball.'

"Just out of curiosity," Bryan asked, "What is this great secret you have?"

“Troy, why don’t you tell him the story,” Eva replied. Troy stepped up, “I work at a record store. Big surprise, I know. Well, the day the Martians landed, I was in the store, and a couple of little teeny-boppers were wanting me to play this new song so they could hear it. Just then, two of the Martian scouts came into the store, just looking around at the time. We were told they were our friends, so I just sort of glanced at them, and tried not to stare too much. Anyways, the two girls still were asking me to play the song for them. I’m gonna tell ya’ that song is really awful, and I was doing everything I could not to play it, yet again. My manager was in the store that day, and ordered me to play the song, so I guess I had to. Whatever. Did I mention just how awful that thing is?” Troy paused and looked at Bryan.

“Yeah, we got it, it’s a terrible song,” Bryan replied dryly, “So what?”

“Well, I put the CD into the store player, and as soon as the song started, the Martians reacted really strangely to it. They tried to cover their ears, which they couldn’t get to through those fishbowls on their heads. One of them drew his disintegrator pistol, but they other stopped him, and they both sort of staggered out of the shop.”

“I guess they didn’t like the song either,” Sherer said.

“No, it’s more than that,” Troy said, “It actually was causing them physical pain. I kind of wondered about that but wasn’t going to do anything more at the time since they ‘came in peace.’ I didn’t forget though, and once they started shooting the place up, I grabbed a CD player and set it up in a hidden place. When the Martians got near, I turned the song on as loud as it would go. Three of those ugly things actually died trying to avoid the sound; finally, one of them zapped my player with a disintegrator, and the remaining Martians, who had been writhing in pain on the street, got up and staggered away. Well, as you can imagine, I was really shocked, I mean, I know the song is awful and all, but I never thought it was so bad it could kill something. I snuck away from my hiding place and found Sherriff Eva here. When I told her what had happened she was amazed. We snuck back to the music store and grabbed as many copies of the CD as we could, then Eva contacted you guys on the

radio, once you got here."

"Your commander, or General, or whatever the heck he is, told me I was a crackpot at the time, and that I shouldn't be wasting his time with this BS." Eva recounted, "But apparently that all changed as you started getting your butts handed to you. One of your patrols saw us take down a saucer with nothing more than a boom box and a CD, so your commander got ahold of me on the radio and set up this meeting."

"Now, we're out of time, and the Martians have destroyed everything that plays music in the whole town except a couple of iPods. So we need to get these CDs back to your headquarters. 'The Psyopers' want them, I'm told," Eva finished.

Bryan and Sherer were literally dumb-founded. Neither could believe that something as simple as music could be an effective weapon against the brainies, but orders was orders, so they decided to go along with it.

That was two hours ago, though, and the situation had drastically changed. Sherer was dead, as were most of his men. There were still six or seven brainies out there trying to get to them, and time was running short. "Come on, we've got to get up there with Craigs!" He told the civvies.

They dashed forward to the ruined corner wall Craigs was firing from. Another Martian went down to a barrage of SAW fire. "Good, now there's only a handful of them left," thought Bryan.

"We're going to have to make a run for it," he told them. "Once we get across the main street, you head down that lane. It's just over a kilometer to the camp, just in case we get split up. They know we're coming, so they won't shoot at you, but they will give us cover fire if we're coming in hot."

"You ready?" he asked.

"Yep," was the reply from all three.

"Wait!" Troy said, "There's still three of them over on the right: one

in the street, and two in the candy store. If we go two directions as once, we stand a better chance." Putting action to words, Troy leapt from cover and started across the street.

"Damn! Stupid kid! Craigs, get after him!" Bryan ordered. Just as Craigs was moving to try to intercept, Eva took off running across the road as well.

"God, I hope this is worth it," thought Bryan, and he ran out from cover after her.

Time all seemed to slow down for him. He saw Troy in the middle of the road shoot one of the brainies with his crossbow, but he was gunned down before he could reload. Craigs blasted away at the brainy who killed Troy, and knocked him down before being rushed by another one. Eva was almost to the other side of the street when a brainy jumped out at her. She dodged his attack and fought back using her shotgun like a club. He rushed in, knocking the Martian back, and shot him point blank in the chest. Craigs was down, bleeding out in the street, and the Martian who did it was coming for him.

He turned to face the attacker, knife in hand. "Thank God combatives works," he thought. He took that brainy down, and turned in time to get rushed by another one. He barely got himself into position and threw the Martian over his shoulder. The last one broke from cover, coming straight for Eva. She dodged the attack and kicked him out of the way before tearing off down the road. Bryan grabbed for the brainy before it could pursue her and stabbed it in the back.

Eva was clear, and running like the wind. She was gonna make it. "Wait! What the hell?" Another Martian stepped out from the ruins, and made a beeline for Eva. Just as he was watching, the other Martian who was down, got back up, and stabbed him in the shoulder. "Oh, God! I'm not gonna make it," Bryan thought. "It doesn't look like she is either. This whole thing was a wasted eff… Wait, oh my God!"

Eva saw the Martian moving to intercept her. She realized it was down to her or it and tucked her head down, tightening every

muscle in her body. It was right in front of her. She smacked into the Martian with all she was worth, turning as she hit him, and spinning away like a world class running back.

“She knocked him on his ass!” Bryan cheered. “She’s clear! Run, Eva! Run!”

The Martian knife descended once again, this time through Bryan’s throat.

Eva didn’t stop running until she was safely inside the barricades and concertina wire. Out of breath, and heaving with exertion, she looked back, but couldn’t see anyone coming behind her. “Crap, I thought he’d get through,” she lamented. “Take me to your commander. I have valuable intelligence on how to kill those bastard brainies.”

***

The idea for this story came to me from two sources. My daughter and I were playing Mars Attacks scenario two. That should be obvious. The game ended in a draw with the Martians getting all four critter counters and killing Troy, but the humans had two alien intelligence counters, and Eva made it off the board at the six point column. It was a real nail biter of a game. I drew a reinforcements card on that final turn and attacked Eva in the deployment zone, but my daughter rolled to evade and was able to get off the board. The Sergeant had taken out three out of four Martians in close combat but died in that last turn as well.

The second source for this story is that three years ago, in November, two friends of mine, Sergeant First Class John Bryan McCain and Sergeant Thomas Sherer, were killed in Afghanistan on patrol in the Zabul Province. I wanted to honor their sacrifice as well, so I made them the heroes of the story.

The Unlucky Heroes

by Blake Earle

The following narrative is based on a battle using scenario 2: The Front Line from the Mars Attacks rule book. Note: Mistakes were made; the heroic ability to avoid damage was overlooked.

***

Eva jogged along the empty street, Troy at her heels. If they could just make it to the precinct house--

There was a flash of turquoise up ahead, and she swore under her breath. She pulled the kid into the cover of a blown-out store moments before the air was filled with gunfire. From the sound of the shots hitting the wall, they were massively outnumbered. They'd walked into an entire Martian squad.

“What are we gonna do?” asked Troy.

Eva shot him a glance and held up a hand that told him to stay where he was. The situation was worse than she initially thought; they faced a force of at least fifteen Martians. They were spread out across the street like a hunting party, methodically sweeping the ruined buildings. However, the laser fire had all but ceased. She dared to peek around the brick wall where they were hiding, so she could see what had distracted them.

A lowly squirrel scurried along the tops of the ruins trying to escape. A few Martians began firing wildly as it clung to anything it could hold. Dashing to dodge the incoming lasers became too much as one Martian got a lucky shot off and blasted the top of the wall, knocking the small rodent from the top of the ruins. Another Martian immediately pounced on it, gripped it in both hands and began viciously slamming the critter against the ground. He held the limp creature high in the air and yelled out “Ack! Ack ack!” before stealing it away.

Eva's sympathy for the thing's misfortune was cut short as yet another animal succumbed to the invader's clutches. She saw the flash of a cat dart behind a pile of bricks away from the main force of the aliens. Soon after, a shriek rang out as a Martian appeared from behind a corner and brought it's foot down, and judging by the screech, on top of the cat. The painful piercing cry continued as the Martian pulled the poor animal up by the tail, but silenced its screams by stuffing it head first into a canister.

Her fear of being captured quickly began to out-weigh that of being killed. There was no telling what sort of deranged experiments the aliens were conducting on their mother-ship, though they were no doubt horribly painful and cruel. Just then, she heard a deafening buzzing noise. She expected to see a massive swarm, however a single massive creature flew overhead.

“What the hell is that?” Troy asked as he leaned around the side of the wall to take a look for himself.

They saw a mutant bug composed of a hornet's stinger and wings, a tarantula's head and legs, and a crab's pincers and crustaceous body. Eva began thinking of the experiments again. “It must've been created by the Martians somehow,” said Eva.

It soon became obvious that though the Martians had created the monster, they were unable to control it. As it landed, two Martians reeled in terror before a claw reached forward and closed around one of them, splitting the alien in half and splattering green gooey blood. The other was gathered by eight spindly legs before two giant fangs were thrust into its shoulder. Then the huge wings began to flutter with a piercing drone as the giant bug lifted into the air; An impossible feat given its size. And before any Martians had time to regroup, the mutant bug disappeared into the distance with its prey.

Eva and Troy turned back behind the wall, both relieved and horrified at what they had seen. “I'm glad that wasn't us,” said Troy.

Though the two Martians dispatched by the mutant bug was a turn of good luck, the aliens still held the advantage of numbers. But the scene had no doubt rattled their foe. Eva was wondering how to

best approach this temporary weakness when a pungent smell filled the air. “Do you smell that?” She asked Troy.

“Smells like barbeque,” he answered as they both looked back around the side of the wall.

The next sight was no less unbelievable as the first. A roaring fire was moving over the horizon of the street. Accompanying the crackle of the flames was a painful mooing and the recognizable sound of thundering hooves. The approaching fire was none other than a stampeding herd of cows set ablaze. Some had their bodies so badly damaged by the flames their ribs were exposed. The cattle ran up the length of the street toward Troy and Eva, and as the herd passed through the line of Martians, some of them pointed and laughed at the ill-fated animals.

“We have to do something,” said Troy, “We have to move.” There was no doubt Troy and Eva were in trouble, but they needed a plan. They couldn't just run out into the open.

As the burning cows began to get closer and closer, the ground began to rumble. The vibrations were so severe that a nearby wall toppled over. Then, Eva noticed that the wall they were leaning against began to tremble too, though it was much bigger. Its foundation began to give out and before her or Troy had time to react, a cascade of bricks was coming down around them.

She became pinned beneath the pile. The weight was unbearable and she fought to will herself to move. During her struggle, she noticed two Martians spotted what had happened and were moving on their position. Troy cried out as he began moving bricks off of his body. He was halfway out when Eva saw his body stiffen and shake as if zapped with electricity. Then his face froze into a state of shock before melting away from his skull. The rest of his flesh followed suit leaving only his skeleton, which was illuminated in a haunting green glow before bursting into ash.

Eva immediately found her strength and began fighting vigorously to free herself. The Martians were closer now. Her legs were buried too deeply to move. She looked around her for some sort of aid. In the distance, about half a block away, she saw a small squad of US

Marines setting up position in sparse cover. “Fools,” she thought, “they don't stand a chance against this many Martians.”

She summoned the remaining energy she had to call out, “RUUUUU---AAAAAHHH” A searing pain shot into her side before she could finish her warning and it was turned into a scream of agony. A burning sensation began to spread across her body. Not only did her skin feel like it was on fire, but she could feel her insides being liquefied, turning them into bubbling lava. She felt herself diminishing before thinking her final thought, “At least it's over.”

The End

Enforcers: GUT FEELINGS

by Douglas Thoin

The inside of the *Accuser*-class Interceptor's hold was dim, lit only by the red lights on the drop door at the back. The hum of the engines grew into a drone as they descended into the atmosphere of Prelemia Minor The ship was shaking with turbulence, but the dozen Enforcers being transported held onto the rails without trouble, their helmets masking any emotion behind stoic resolve. NX-437, callsign "Thumper", reached down to do a quick, silent check of her weapons and gear, despite knowing that everything was stowed as perfectly as everyone else's.

It was a nervous habit of hers, one of the few ways that her fears still manifested. Her training had taught her that being afraid was not wrong, but instead to turn that fear into a weapon - when you feel the cold knife in your gut you must pull it out, sharpen it, and prepare to slit your enemy's throat with it. Fear made you faster, stronger, and more alert. Fear could keep you alive, but when not controlled it also made you stupid. And that would get you killed more quickly than any weapon devised by any creature in all the galaxy.

The sounds of battle began to filter in through the reinforced hull, dull thumps and booms forming an uneven staccato behind the drone of the engines. Thumper felt the knife work its way into her stomach and closed her eyes, letting the feeling sharpen her senses and make her heart beat faster. She was ready. The door would open, and her squad - her only family and friends - would descend on this miserable shitball of a world like hellfire given form, killing and burning their enemies wherever they hid.

This world had been quarantined by a Containment Protocol, a "Deadzone", because there had been an outbreak of the Plague. The world had been engaged in a prolonged on-again-off-again war between three different corporations and a colony of Forge Fathers before the outbreak, with alliances and battle lines constantly shifting as control of the planet's resources became increasingly contentious, but now the whole place had descended into barely

contained insanity.

Thumper cared little for the politics of some backwater mining colony, but she knew that nuclear weapons had been deployed on the planet by all three corporations, ostensibly to try and deal with the Plague before the Containment Protocol was necessary, but more likely in a bid to wipe out their rivals' assets. In any case, it would only make her job more difficult. The advanced armor worn by the enforcers would protect them from minor radiation exposure, but since the Plague would likely be using the irradiated ruins as strongholds it meant they would have to be exposed to dangerously high levels. For a fleeting moment she thought about the tens of thousands of innocent civilians trapped on the surface of this doomed world with all this chaos and felt a flicker of emotion, but she had long since discarded those in favor of steely-eyed determination.

The ship dove hard to port, engines whining, and then just as hard to starboard. A moment later the metallic beat of anti-aircraft fire against the hull crescendoed into the sound of tearing metal and whooshing air. Light stabbed the cabin and Thumper had to take a moment to adjust her eyes against the glare, despite her helmet's auto-dim feature. When she looked around she saw the pillars of light stitching through the floor and up the side, and the limp form of Bandsaw, one of the squad's assault enforcers. At a glance it looked like two or three of the rounds had tore through his armor, and blood was running out his boots and into the nearest hole in the floor.

None of the rest of the squad reacted beyond a simple look to assess the situation, and Thumper did the same - this was what was expected of them. They had all died years ago, the names of the people they once were erased from history and burned from their minds, and now they were the fearsome warriors in the service of the Council of Seven, the most elite troopers in all the galaxy. This was expected of them, though admittedly not preferable. She did not mourn her squadmate, her battle brother, her friend. Perhaps back on the cruiser she would miss him, but for now she was occupied with figuring out how to compensate for the loss of his skill set when they made ground fall.

The red lights turned to green and the back door rapidly swung

open. As-one the squad turned and leapt out the speeding interceptor in perfect formation. They were probably a thousand meters over the ground and the interceptor had barely slowed down, a quick glance around revealing why - there was anti-aircraft fire all around and the interceptor had a thin line of black smoke trailing from it, clearly damaged enough to not risk killing them all by getting closer. It wasn't a problem, however, as they had trained for this exact scenario along with a thousand others.

As they dove through the smoke and tracer rounds the altitude was displayed on the HUD in front of everyone's eyes. They all fired the jump jets on their back and landed in tandem on the roof of a scorched building at the periphery on the battle. It looked like a small army of corporate soldiers owned by TransHuman Intergalactic were under siege by a horde of Plague, and the orders that flashed across their HUDs said that they were to clear the air defenses so that more enforcers could come reinforce the position of their human allies.

Thumper pulled her defender shield off her back and the shotgun off her hip, readying both and doing one more unnecessary nervous check of all her gear. Sergeant Bullwhip began giving orders and they formed up, preparing to take a Plague-controlled anti-aircraft turret and open up the skies. The knife twisted in her gut again as she saw the hulking forms of large, alien creatures ahead of her and she closed her eyes again for a brief moment as she pulled the blade out, sharp and ready to kill each and every one of them.

Deadzone ‘Ritual’

by Matthew Lindsay

Everyone has a pre-battle ritual. Everyone.

First Recon G38-04 Rylor Ings looked around him as his four Enforcer brothers and sisters went about their own rituals, each honed into a fine art. Some were repeatedly checking gear, a methodical approach to steel the mind. Someone was muttering prayers, to steel to soul. Rylor wasn’t a religious man, but he didn’t resent those who prayed. Whatever it took to get soldier to fight was worth something.

One thing all rituals have in common is they are done in quiet, each Enforcer’s ritual as personal as their dreams and desires.

Above the roaring of the ship’s engines could be heard the distant sounds of a raging battle growing ever louder as they began the descent. Explosions were muffled, felt through the hull: the planet was going to Hell. And they were the first in, boots on the ground, eyes on target, with only one objective: evidence of Plague life forms.

Mission parameters: lethal force authorised, planet population irrelevant and expendable.

‘Lethal force authorised’. That statement always made a First Recon unit smile with a bitter irony: lethal force was what they were used for. Strike fast, strike hard, get out with the intel. Avoid civilians if possible, but kill any and all who stand in your way. You don’t have time to talk and reason. *The objective is all that matters; there are bigger things at stake.* The words of Rylor’s career sergeant from his boot camp days still echoed in his mind.

The ship suddenly banked, the pilot narrowly avoiding either some falling debris or stray missile. The closer they got to the ground, twisting between the higher buildings, the more dangerous the drop became. Every manoeuvre shook the Enforcers strapped into the hold, and with every tilt and roll all knew they had just narrowly

avoided death.

There were rarely survivors to a hit on a Recon ship; they were built for speed and mobility and to rapidly deploy, not for combat. Anything much more than small arms fire could bring it down; the Enforcers lives were entirely in the skilled hands of the pilot. Rylor could see some of the lips of his companions moving, eyes closed as they fervently whispered prayers to whatever gods they believed in.

There isn't a soldier to be found that doesn't have a pre-battle ritual. Rylor wasn't a gambling man, but he'd damn well lay a wager that even the alien warriors of the Judwan or Forge Fathers have a ritual.

The internal speaker crackled into life. '*Drop ETA 2 minutes.*'

There isn't a soldier to be found that doesn't have a pre-battle ritual, because there isn't any peace to be found among the stars. *We're fighting a galaxy-wide war,* he thought. *Fighting to protect a future, fighting to honour a past. We've survived on the blood of martyrs.* Humanity's worlds existed on blood; the blood of the soldiers and Enforcers fighting on the frontiers. Mankind was embroiled in a war for our way of life, and there could be no peace until it was secured. *We're fighting on the very edges of the galaxy while Earth's become just another star in the night. How many of us would even know which star our home was?*

'Drop ETA 1 minute.'

Rylor thought of the home he had left and the once-called-home he was fighting for. He thought of his family. He thought of his adopted family, his brothers and sisters in arms beside him, and what they'd been through. He thought of the enemy, specifically, he thought of the Plague. He thought of what it did to a man, to a woman, to a child. He'd seen the bodies. He'd put them down.

'Drop ETA 30 seconds.'

Everyone has a pre battle ritual. Everyone. Some check gear. Some say prayers.

‘Drop ETA 20 seconds.’

But Rylor thought. That was his ritual. He thought of everything he fought for.

‘Drop ETA 10 seconds.’

He thought of everything he’d die for.

‘Drop ETA 5 seconds.’

And this was it.

‘4.’
‘3.’
‘2.’
‘1.’

The Escape

by Christopher Verspeak

No Escape

Why me? That's a question I've been asking myself a lot recently.

For a start, why did I, of all my father's children, have to be the one daughter who wasn't satisfied with a comfortable job for life in the deep mines like everyone else? Why was I the one that marched up to my local VP's office and volunteered for planetary reassignment? 'Ingrid. you're a lunger,' my dad had said, 'Just like me and just like everyone else in our family. That means we work the mines. Why'd you wanna throw the life you got here down the hole?'

Poor old dad. He couldn't see how trapped he was, how trapped all us lungers were on Ostin. Generations after our gene-engineered ancestors were brought to Ostin, with its toxic soup atmosphere, and made it livable, made that 'Just Like Old Earth!' atmosphere the purebreds are always telling everyone about, we're still there. Only now we work underground in the mines that are still too dangerous, too poisonous, for the pures.

'No Expense Spared!' is their other favorite strapline to trot out when they want to show off how great the world 'they' created is to the GCPS. They're right though, only *we're* still paying the price.

I escaped, though. I got that transfer and came here, to Orestes. Which brings me to my next question: if I escaped, how come I'm now hiding behind a pile of box-files and an upturned desk in an office in the middle of Central Station?

I had actually begun to enjoy life here at the Station before it all got holed. My job wasn't much different to the one I did on Ostin. Officially I was a Technician Third Class. I still basically shuffled paper and occasionally took samples from conveyor belts to Testing. But I was on a new world, in the expansion sphere. Orestes.

When I was younger I saw a vid of a Dreadball game on that blue planet, Azure, was it? The game was nothing special, but the arena - it was green! Not the toxic green that came out of the waste pipes near our house, but living green! And the aliens! Things covered in fur, things with more arms than legs and more eyes than teeth! So many different shapes and sounds colors. I knew I had to see more of the universe than the back end of an ore plant on Ostin.

Well I definitely got my wish on Orestes. First there was the accident. The survey team that got trapped underground in the jungle up north. Then a rescue team went out to help them but then they came back - only changed. They came back monsters.

Now everyone I worked with is dead. Pretty much everyone I knew since I arrived on Orestes, I think. Everyone except me. Which brings me to the final question I ask myself as I lie here in my makeshift bunk; why am I still alive?

Well, mostly its because of *him*, of course. Partly its because of dumb luck, maybe, but its mostly *him*. I'm in hiding, surrounded by a horde of what used to be my co-workers who now appear to want to eat me, or worse, and the only thing protecting me is a faceless grey soldier who scares me almost as much as the monsters do. So I'm also wondering, *if these guys came to rescue us all, how come they all got killed as soon as they stepped off their landing craft?*

We've been in here for hours now, and all that time I just hid, nursing my injured shoulder, while he knelt beside me, his rifle aimed at the door. I had begged him to let us rest. My arm was really hurting and we had been running for so long. I might have slept or maybe just passed out for a bit there too, but he stayed on guard the whole time.

He had told me he was an 'Enforcer'. I thought the Corporation would send soldiers to rescue us. Rescue me. Real ones, not like the local security that used to be here. But this guy is not like any soldier I ever saw before.

For a start, he never takes his helmet off and his armor is, well, incredible. He must be nearly eight feet tall and he is super strong, super fast, and I have never seen him eat or drink. Once, when we

were first running from his troop's disastrous deployment on the landing pads, I asked him his name. He said '*Kilo Two Fourteen*'. How weird is that? I just call him Kilo now, but its not like we talk a lot. I mean, I told him my name was Ingrid too, but he doesn't call me that. He usually just points, or sometimes just pulls me where he wants me to go.

So, just as I'm starting to wonder again whether the old karmics were right and maybe we do all really get three lives and I *really* messed up my last two, Kilo moves.

His left hand leaves the grip on his gun, leaving it propped across the desk and still pointing at the room's only door, and moves to a little box on the floor next to him. He slowly flicks a row of covers up with one finger, click, click, click, exposing red buttons beneath. I see now there are several very fine wires running from the box towards the door.

I'm just about to ask him what he's doing but, as I open my mouth to speak, he quietly says, 'Stay down'. And, just as I'm about to ask him why, the door to the room crashes in.

I'm slightly embarrassed to say I scream a little from shock when that happened. But I'm not ashamed to say that I scream *a lot* when the monsters came in after it.

The first one, it must be seven feet tall, comes in roaring, saliva flying out of its mouth, something much, much worse oozing from the sores and wounds on its grotesque pink body. It doesn't do it for long though - a single shot from Kilo's rifle, so loud it started my ears ringing, puts a bullet straight through its cranium and it falls to the floor only a few feet into the room. As it drops I realize it was Kelly.

He was a technician like me once, younger though but quite sweet really. Its strange seeing what's left of his head splattering across the floor and knowing that, until Kilo killed it, the thing that grew out of Kelly really, *really* wanted to rip me limb from limb.

They try to rush us then - the door frame is practically broken free from the wall as three more of the creatures that used to be my co-

workers force their way in and try to get to our little hideaway in the office. Their bodies have been warped and ravaged by whatever it was the miners found up in the jungle clearing and their faces are twisted and stretched with an animal rage. They are covered in blood and drool and wet with gore and I don't recognize any of them.

They are quick and strong. But Kilo is easily up to the task and puts them down with more rapid shots. He is so precise, so accurate, so unflustered, even though I, by that point, am just solidly screaming and clasping my hands tight against my ears, the pain from the bite mark on my shoulder forgotten amidst the terror and noise.

I'll tell you right now - being in a firefight like that is no fun. The noise from the rifle is percussive in the small room. Its like being thumped in the chest every time it fires. The smell of propellant and heated metal is like the shuttleport I reported to on that day so far away now, the day I started my journey out here to the rear-end of nowhere. The day I thought I made my escape. There is also the stench from the growing pile of monsters and monster parts between us and the only exit from the room.

They know we're here now. The roaring from outside the room is getting louder, but the fact there is only one way in is helping my quiet companion rack up kills and conserve his ammunition. He has killed at least seven now. What is left of them, their internal organs and bone structures, are scattered all over the space between us and the door...

They stop coming. I'm still screaming but I stop too when I realize Kilo is no longer firing. With a smooth and obviously well-practiced motion he thumbs a switch on his rifle, causing the ammo clip to fall from his weapon. Before it hits the ground he has pulled its replacement from the line of clips on the desk and slid it into place with a metallic 'click'.

'Are they... are they gone?' I ask. My heart is pounding in my chest and tears are running down my dirty cheeks. The pain in my arm starts up again and I squeeze the wound to comfort it.

'No.' he replies without looking away from the door.

And indeed the monsters come again. They are more cautious now, and the widened entrance to the room means some can squeeze shots from their own guns in around the ones that just try to charge us. One even throws in a grenade. I see a small dark object fly in through the doorway towards us, but it bounces off the back of the head of a charging monster wearing the remains of a security guard's uniform. For a split second I am sure the expression on his distended face changes from one of pure rage to something more like puzzlement. I have been peeking over the desk but Kilo pushes my head back down and behind him before the grenade explodes. He releases me and I look back at where the guard-monster had been. There is just a smoldering black mark on the floor now.

The third time they attack, they bring some really heavy guns. One of them starts firing blindly through the wall while his companions charge through the ever widening doorway. The gun makes a slower rhythmic chugging noise as it spits heavy rounds at us. Most of them seem to go wide, they buzz angrily over and around us and smack into the wall behind us. One bounces off the shoulder plate of Kilo's armor though, making him grunt and miss a shot at a charging monster. But when it gets close enough Kilo leans over the desk and impale its skull on the huge knife he carries.

Kilo decides enough is enough. He pulls the blade out of the dead monster, ducks down behind the desk with this back to the door, and pulls me close to his chest with one arm. With the other he hits all the buttons on his little box at once.

The explosive charges he has laid in the corridor outside detonate in a rapid sequence of pops, accompanied by roars of anger and pain. Then the charges around the doorway go off and more monsters are cut to pieces, turned to red mist by shrapnel and the pressure wave. The desk and Kilo's armor protect me from the flying debris but I can't really hear anything except a steady high ringing tone. I can feel blood trickling from my nose and, in my shocked state, I wonder if whatever turned my co-workers into the awful monsters that were just trying to eat me is airborne. As if it matters.

Kilo's explosives have bought us time, but that is all. They will

regroup and we will still be here, trapped. I wonder why Kilo chose to let us rest here in a room with only one exit and why he stayed with a wounded third grade lab technician.

But then, as the monsters outside regroup and Kilo adjusts his position to better cover the even wider entrance to our little hideaway, there is another, smaller explosion to our right and suddenly the wall there is gone.

It has grown dark outside but bright industrial strength lights shine in on us through the dust and smoke. Kilo swivels to aim his rifle at them but there is no answering gunfire and no sounds of approaching monsters. There is the sound of some kind of vehicle engine though, and a voice - a very human sounding voice.

“Well? What are you waiting for? Move your drone asses! Time to leave!”

It comes from some kind of loudhailer system but I don’t recognize the voice - it can’t be anyone from the Station’s staff, surely. But before I can ask who it is and what they want from us, Kilo has made the decision for me.

I am flying. Kilo has lifted me bodily and tucked me under one arm and charges out of the new exit like he’s Lucky Logan heading for a four-pointer. I don’t black out, but things definitely go a bit grey for a while. As more bullets spang into his armor, Kilo races across the room, through the hole in the wall, and out into the night of Orestes.

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Kilo’s Mask

I wake to the sounds of the jungle. The buzzing of insects and screeching of birds is so loud I don’t know if I could have slept at all if I hadn’t been so full of pain meds and sedatives.

Insects are everywhere on Orestes and I feel like I am one of them, cocooned in a hammock behind layers of netting and hanging between two trees. My head feels wooly, numb, and for a moment I

just lie in my nest, feeling safe, secure, weightless. Then I grimace as I remember where I actually am and how I got here.

I try to sit up, too fast, and the pain in my shoulder makes me hiss. I am still wearing the same clothes I have worn since Central Station was first attacked, but one sleeve of my overall is gone now and there is a fresh looking dressing on my shoulder. I gently prod the canula needle I find taped into my hand.

When we arrived here last night, me and Kilo and the man who had rescued us from Central, it was too dark to see much of the landscape and I was practically delirious from pain and exhaustion. My father would have laughed to see me so bone-tired. We had rushed from the offices in Central onto a small flyer. I remember Kilo strapping me into a bucket seat and then pulling some meds from a stack of boxes strapped down in the middle of the machine's hold. I think... Yes, Kilo made me swallow some pills and then there was a pain in my arm, and then - it all went dark. I remember hearing the engines screech and roar as we zipped across the roofs of Central and a lot of rattling, but not much more.

Now I can see the camp is in a small clearing amongst tall trees. Their trunks are taller than the biggest stalactites on Ostin and the canopy of leaves almost completely blocks out the sky. It feels like I'm underground again, safe, in the deep dark mines of my homeworld, not hiding in a jungle on a world full of death. I wish my father was here.

There is another hammock like mine strung up from other trees and a small fire burns nearby. A few crates, some open, most sealed shut, are stacked up to one side. Two trails lead off into the jungle, one on each side of the camp. Kilo is sitting on a box by the fire with his back to me. I manage to part-roll and part-slide out of my bed and, after a bit more struggling, find a way through the bug netting. I can see now Kilo is cleaning the parts of his disassembled rifle. He still has all his armor on, including his helmet. I wonder if he isn't hot in there.

My boots are just outside my protective web, each one up-ended atop long sticks that have been driven into the rich dark floor of the clearing. As I pull them on and fasten them up, Glanner Tass

emerges from one of the trails. I remember him now. He had landed the flyer and then climbed out of the cockpit and into the hold with Kilo and me to introduce himself. I thought he was wearing some kind of mask. But I see now his lower jaw is a metallic prosthetic. Not a classy job, but the cheap kind you see on workers and loaders. He looks almost as human as I do. I remember I thought he was sneering at me last night when we landed here, then realized it was how he smiles.

Tass is carrying two large metal cans and I can hear water sloshing around inside them.

“Hey, you’re up. Welcome back, ma’am.” He sets the water down by the fire. “How are you feeling today?”

I shrug. “Not bad, I guess. Shoulder doesn’t hurt so much. And please, don’t call me ma’am. I’m just a tech.” I might have mumbled something to this effect last night. Maybe I only dreamed it. Tass still seems to think I am somebody important though. “Did you do this?” I take a seat on a vacant box next to Kilo and lift the corner of the dressing on my shoulder.

“That? No, that was all him.” Tass nods at Kilo who says nothing but starts slotting pieces of his rifle back together. “Who'd have thought corporate security would be such good medics?"

I smile weakly. Tass thinks Kilo is from corporate. I think I know better. I think Kilo is part of some kind of corporate military, but some secret branch of it that only gets sent in when something goes really, really wrong. Like when monsters come. Whatever he is though, without him I would probably be dead by now, or worse. Yeah, it’s true I arguably saved him first when his troop’s deployment went so badly wrong back at the landing pads of course. But he has kept me alive since then, including apparently doing a passable job of treating my wound.

Tass has a deep, if not varied selection of EZ-meals and he mixes a few in a battered metal pot over the fire. Kilo refuses any when offered, saying he is ‘adequately nutrified’, but Tass and I eat and we talk about how we each came to be here, stranded in a jungle clearing on this Fifth Sphere planet, hiding from horrors.

Tass is the only survivor of his crew. He tells us seven of them landed at Central in a bulk lifter a few weeks ago, looking for freelance work ferrying supplies and personnel in their little flyer around sites on the equator. Orestes was only acquired two decades ago, standard time, but there are already dozens of sites being dug, cut, and mined around the planet. A constant stream of gear and personnel would arrive at Central or one of the other major hubs before being ferried around the planet so it doesn't surprise me I haven't seen Tass before.

"We were at a dig site up north when 'they' came." Tass says. The fire has burned low and he pauses to put another log under the kettle he has now hung above it. "We'd been working it pretty hard, moving drilling kit and parts up there for a few days straight. So we figured we'd stay overnight and get some rest, then head back to Central for another load. Big mistake. Some of the crews were saying they'd heard strange noises coming from the jungle, but hey, it's the jungle, right? Everything's strange out there."

I nod in agreement. My world, Ostin, like a lot of Third Sphere worlds, hasn't seen any greenery larger than a recreational park or biolab space for centuries. What's the point? We get all the oxygen we need from fission plants. Real trees just take up space someone could live in or build a factory on. Orestes is almost entirely covered in green.

"We'd heard murmurs about comms being down with some of the more remote sites all day," Tass continues, "but who knows with these things? Could be a downed transmitter, some atmospheric disturbance, hah, someone got wasted on stims and turned something off by accident and no one's even realized it yet. I've seen that sort of thing before. But when *they* came - well, I never seen anything like *that* before."

I have. I saw it at Central Station when we thought Berrick's expedition was coming back in. The doc went north with meds and personnel to help out with whatever had gone wrong at Site:733. Their trucks came back alright. But the things that were driving them...

“It was just an exploratory site, you know? Maybe five or six dozen personnel, plus us, and a couple of security guards. We never had a chance. McDonald, my boss, he went down first. Then Ryza. Then Percy. I don’t know what happened to the rest. I... I waited as long as I could in the flyer, but then... I took off.”

He stares into the fire, as do I. Remembering. I hid too when the killing started. There’s no point denying it. If I had had access to a flyer, I would have taken off too.

“What were you doing in Central when you found us?” I look up in surprise. Kilo has finished cleaning his weapon and slotted it back together. It rests across his lap as he examines Tass with those inscrutable red lenses in his helmet.

“Looking for survivors. Supplies. A way off world. Anything really. I made this camp after my crew got holed and waited here for some kind of rescue mission to come. But it’s been what, four weeks at least now, right? And it’s kinda scary out here on your own, you know?” I smile but I doubt that Kilo does know. “I’ve been to every major settlement within 700 miles of here. They’re all gone.”

“Gone?” I say, “What do you mean *gone*?”

“I mean they’re all like Central. Wasted. Dead. Blown up. Completely holed. Some of them are burnt to the ground. Some look they’ve been hit by some kind of artillery. Most are full of those things. And not a single offworld flyer in any of them. Except the one in Central.”

Kilo leans forward. “There is an offworld in Central?”

“Well, yeah. Its not a big one, not like any flyer I’ve seen before either, but it had heat shields and big boosters on the back. Definitely trans-atmospheric. Strange though. It was completely unmarked. No names, no numbers.”

I sigh. Tass is talking about the ship Kilo arrived on. The one he and his troop disembarked from just before they were cut to pieces by the station’s defensive lasers and missile systems and ambushed by the things.

“I did a couple of passes at height over it. It didn’t look too badly damaged, but those things were all over it. Looked like they were trying to get in.”

“Then we must move fast.” says Kilo.

“Move? Move where?” I say.

“Back to Central Station.” Kilo replies. “We have to go back.”

Tass snorts out some of the caff he has brewed on the fire. “Are you kidding me? For what? No way, man, I say we wait here. Someone will come, right? I mean, they sent you, so someone else will come, right? When you don’t report back in, I mean?”

Kilo doesn’t answer straight away, but he puts down his rifle and pulls his seat closer to the fire.

“No. There will be no other ‘rescue’ team. My team were it. After us there is - nothing.”

Tass is incredulous. “What? That’s crazy! I mean, if corporate sent you and you don’t call back in, they’ll send someone else to get you, right?”

Kilo slowly shakes his head. “No. What you need to understand is this: my troops and I are, were, the most dangerous weapons the Corporation wields. If we don’t come back, there is nothing else.”

Tass looks confused, but I have figured it out. “He means there is nothing else the Corporation *can* do if Kilo and his buddies can’t fix it. So what *do* they do if you don’t come back?”

“In approximately two days a containment protocol will go into effect.”

“What’s that, a quarantine?” I ask.

“In a way. The creatures we have been fighting are known as the Plague. They live only to infect new hosts and eradicate competitor

organisms. They do this extremely well. To prevent this happening, to stop the Plague on Orestes spreading to other systems, all travel to and from this world will be forbidden and halted. No starships will be allowed within slide distance. Any contravening ships will be terminated with prejudice. McKinley drive navigation system reference to Orestes and neighboring planets will be expunged from the records. No one will be allowed to approach or travel to or from this world or anywhere near it or even see it appear on their bridge monitors until it is established there are no functioning Plague organisms present. This world will be the centre of a deadzone in space. ”

“But... for how long?” Tass asks.

“On a planet with a biomass like this,” Kilo looks directly at Tass, “I would estimate containment will last for no less than one hundred standard years.”

It’s like Kilo has sucked all the oxygen out of the little camp. I could swear the fire burns just a bit lower and I start to feel slightly dizzy.

“Are you saying we are going to be trapped in a hole in space with plague monsters that want to eat us for no less than a hundred years?”

“That is correct.” he replies. “Unless we leave soon, on my ship, and before the Containment Protocol comes into effect.”

We sit there in silence then, Tass and I both staring into the embers of the fire, wondering how, in the name of all that is sacred, we are supposed to go back to Central and retrieve Kilo’s ship from the horde of Plague creatures that have infested the station.

Then Kilo does something completely unexpected, something that changes the whole tone of our little conference. He undoes the seals on his helmet and removes the faceplate.

“We can do this,” he says, in a human voice, un-modulated by helmet speakers, “I can save us all, but only if we go together.”

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The Tailings

This is crazy, I think to myself. *Crazy, crazy, crazy.* This is my mantra today. It's what I clung to as I crept through the gas-filled vent tunnels beneath Central Station, Orestes. I am alone, scared, terrified in fact. It is only by repeatedly reminding myself how ridiculous this situation is that I am able to find the courage to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

It took an hour of crawling through the network of vents and pipes beneath Central Station to get here. Something I was only able to do because of my mutation. Back home, on Ostin, being a lunger meant I would only ever be a low caste worker in the mines, able to tolerate exposure to the toxic gases down there that would kill a ruling caste elite in minutes. A genetic heritage that would have forever kept me trapped underground if I hadn't escaped here. Out of the cut and straight into the spoils.

An extra lung came in handy down there though, where hole sections were flooded with toxic gases. The fumes from the mineral processors and spent fuel pods would have been extremely bad for Glanner Tass. His 'tronic prosthetics would have been corroded as fast as his organics. Being small also meant I could get through gaps and accessways that Kilo could never fit through in his Enforcer armor. So it had to be me that ended up here, huddled beneath a tarp on the landing pad, waiting for it to get dark enough for me to sneak aboard the lander and insert Kilo's security key.

I gently lift a flap of the tarpaulin that covers the container drums I am hiding between. Kilo's lander is maybe two hundred yards away, its hull gleaming in the waning light of Orestes' sunset. It looks like a fat drop of blood, all sleek curves and smooth lines.

The tunnels were hot and damp. Out here on the surface the air is only a little cooler. The smell of burning drifts in the air from collapsed Shensigs on my right and there is a worse smell too, one of rot and decay. I cannot see any Plague creatures though. The landing pads look quiet, peaceful.

The ship has sat here for nearly two weeks now, ever since Kilo and

his troop arrived on Orestes. They were ambushed by the Plague soon after they disembarked, but not before they closed the ship's landing ramps and locked it up. It must have pretty good security too. The Plague haven't been able to break into it.

Various power tools and cutting devices lie discarded around the ship to prove they have tried. I shudder at the thought of the hideous screaming monsters that chased Kilo and me out of here two days ago still having enough intelligence to operate machinery, let alone go transatmospheric. But this ship gives me, Kilo, and Glanner Tass a way off this horrible planet too.

I check, for the thousandth time, that I still have the key Kilo gave me in my right hip pocket. It feels small. Back at the camp, Kilo explained it could give him remote access to the lander though. If I can put it into the ships navcom he can fly it, and me, to a rendezvous with him and Tass.

After dropping me off at the grated entrance to Central's underground pipe network, he and Tass should have moved on to the Comms tower to disable the station's defense grid. No point in taking off in the lander if we're just going to get shot down by the missile racks that guard the pads.

I click on the communicator stud in my ear. "Kilo, are you there?" I whisper.

"I am. Your location?" His answer is immediate and the strength in his voice is comforting. He has been different since that morning at Tass's camp. When we were running and hiding he was a cold machine. A machine that was fantastic at keeping us alive, but still mechanical, like he was running on automatic. But at the camp he took off his helmet. He showed us he is as human as Tass and me. I am relieved to hear his voice.

"Yeah, I'm there. I'm close. Where are you?"

"I am in the Comms Tower, as we agreed." He sounds almost offended. "I have eyes on the landing pad. Where are you exactly?"

I describe my hiding place to him and it takes him a few seconds to

find me.

“The sun is low. You should go now. Their eyesight is weakest in low light.”

There is no sign of movement now and there are still deep shadows across the pad. But I will still have to cross a fair distance without cover to reach the access ramp on the side of the ship.

“Kilo, are you sure about this? Is Tass ready?”

“Mr Tass is ready go on your mark, Ingrid. You should go now.”

“And you won’t let them get me?”

“No. Trust me. Go. Now.”

I bite my lip and check the ammo counter on the pistol Tass gave me again. Still says seventeen rounds.

“Ok, ok. I’m going.” *This crazy, this is crazy*. “Going now.”

I lift my head above the drums and start jogging towards the ship. I curse silently when I see movement. Guards, moving around a building on the far side of the ship. If I angle it right I can keep the ship’s landing struts between me and them most of the way though. Besides, Kilo is watching me through the scope of his rifle in the Comms tower behind me. He has assured me he will kill anything that comes near me. He will also cue Glanner Tass to bring in his flyer in a low run over the Station, providing a distraction for any Plague creatures in the area.

I start to run, trying to stay low and out of sight of the guards. There is no noise other than my heart pounding in my ears.

I turn straight towards the lander. Something’s wrong. There is no sign of Tass. He should be zooming overhead by now. I can’t stop to ask Kilo what is going on though.

Then I hear a loud bang, then another. They are above me. I can’t hear Tass’s flyer though - is he flying really high or something? I am

nearly at the lander when the ground in front of me starts to light up. I stop running. A hundred yards to go.

I look up. The bang I heard was no distracting explosion designed to give me cover. It was a flare and it gently drifts down towards me. I am completely exposed. I hear another flare being fired. I am confused. It sounded as if it came from the area of the Comms tower. Three stars light up the landing pad now. Shadows dance around the base of the ship's landing gear. they remind me of the demons parents on Ostin tell their kids live in the deep mines.

I hear a roar from behind me but I don't even look around. I know it is the sound of death and I start running again. I have no choice now but to get to the lander and get inside before death gets to me.

Fifty yards to go. Another bang, another flare. Where is Glanner Tass? I can't stop to ask Kilo just why our plan is so holed. I just keep running.

As I near the ramp I see the guards coming towards me from the other side of the ship. I pull out my pistol and fire it wildly ahead of me. A couple of the bullets ping off the landing gear and I doubt I hit anything else. I see several of the creatures duck back behind cover though. Good enough.

The pistol clicks empty and I throw it away before pulling Kilo's key from my pocket. I hold it in front of me, frantically pressing it's transmit button. The ship's port slides open and a ramp starts to descend.

Slowly though. I have to vault up onto it before it extends all the way to the ground. Once inside I hit the switch to close the port again, on the left of the entrance, right where Kilo said it would be. The howling from outside is shut out as the doorway closes and the ramp retracts. I hear loud pings as solid rounds ricochet off the side of the lander though.

The inside of the lander is cool and quiet though. I take a moment to catch my breath again, listening. I cannot hear any more shots glancing off the side of the ship. More importantly I cannot hear any movement aboard it.

I press on the communicator. “Kilo, I made it.”

“Good. Well done. Head up to the cockpit.”

“Wait a minute,” My fear is turning to confused anger now. “What the hole happened to the distractions? Where is Tass?” My whole body is shaking with adrenaline. I realize I held my breath the whole way from the drums to the ship, but all three lungs are heaving now.

“I am sorry. It appears my explosives were compromised and you were spotted by a sentry who then fired flares. I cannot say where Glanner Tass is at this point. Move to the cockpit and call me when you are in position.”

Kilo is back to machine-like efficiency mode. But I almost got killed!

“Ok.” I say. Kilo is so calm. I wonder if he would be so cool if it were him that just had to run across a flat open plain with illumination rounds lighting you up for a hundred monsters to chase. I sigh. Yeah, he would.

We went over the layout of the landing craft back at the camp. The ramp I have boarded from has put me in an auxiliary corridor. On the other side of the wall in front of me is what Kilo called the combat load bay. This is where he sat when he arrived with his troop. I could get to the bay if I went right from here, but I go left.

This ship is so unlike the lander I arrived on. Or any ship I have seen before. The walls are smooth and glassy. There are no obvious fittings, yet light seems to emanate from within. Even the floor looks polished, yet it is not slippery. There is a solid looking door between me and the cockpit, but it slides smoothly open when I approach it.

The cockpit is more spacious than I expected. Three couched recliner seats are arranged facing a bank of monitors and dials and a row of clear windows. Through them I can see the Comms tower in the distance where Kilo will be watching me.

I slide into the central seat of the three. It sighs and I nearly jump back out of it before I realize it is remolding itself to match my own shape. I relax back into it. It is the most comfortable seat I have ever sat in. A control panel slides out of a hidden compartment beneath me and arranges itself above my abdomen, then rotates until it faces me.

“Kilo, I’m in the cockpit. What do I do now?” I ask.

“Take out the auto navkey. Now insert it into the slot on the control panel. The slot is on the right side and about halfway up the panel.”

I find the slot and insert the key into it. Instantly more panels light up all around me. It’s like the ship comes to life as lines of text and symbols scroll across the displays and are projected onto the windows.

‘REMOTE ACCESS: CONFIRMED’ flashes up on the biggest screen. I let out a big sigh of relief. At least this part of the plan is working. Somewhere else, Kilo now has control of this ship and should be able to get it off the ground any second now.

While I wait for him to do so, I scroll through some of the displays on the panel across my lap, wondering if there are any weapon systems I could use to take out some of the monsters outside. Instead, I see something that makes my heart sink.

“Kilo, are you there. I think we have a problem.” He does not answer. I give it a second, then try again.

“Uh, Kilo? Are you there? We’ve got a problem here. I mean, I’ve got a problem here. There’s a screen here says the rear loading ramp is lowered. Can that be right? Kilo?”

He is not answering me, but I am staring at a screen that is telling me there is an open access to this ship. A big one.

“Kilo? Can you hear me? Can we get out of here now, please?”

Finally he answers me.

“Hello, Ingrid, I am here. I am sorry, but the lander will not be taking off. I have lowered the loading bay ramp and Plague forms are currently boarding. If you stay in the cockpit you will be safe from them though.”

I taste bile in my throat. “You did what? What do you mean the Plague are boarding? Why aren’t we taking off?” A thousand questions crowd my mind but I notice the screens in front of me flashing as more menus are accessed and options selected remotely. “Kilo, what are you doing?”

“Thanks to you supplying the key I now have full remote access to the ship’s systems. I am currently setting the ships engines to overload mode. There, done. They will detonate in less than one minute.”

The blood drains out of me. I am numb all over. “But, Kilo, what about getting off world? I thought we were going to escape together. With Tass.”

“Mr Tass is already dead. I killed him as soon as we reached the tower. I am sorry, Ingrid, but my mission was never to escape from this world and I cannot allow anyone or anything else to do so either. With the Deadzone in effect, preventing that from happening is, in fact, my mission.”

My head spins. “What are you talking about, Kilo? What do you mean it’s your ‘mission’?”

“My troop and I came here to exterminate the Plague. But with my troop gone my combat effectiveness is severely limited. By filling the ship with as many Plague forms as possible I am able to raise my kill ratio significantly. I thank you for giving me the means to do this.”

Cold realization washes over me like a sluice. He has used me. As bait. I am the tailings of this planet and he has found a way to use me anyway. It was Kilo who fired the flares, not a sentry. He did that so they would see me and follow me onto the ship. He showed

me his face at the camp so I would follow him back here.

“Ingrid, the Corporation also thanks you for your service. By your sacrifice you have increased the efficiency of the reclamation process for Orestes by perhaps as much as 0.03%.”

A countdown appears on all the monitors simultaneously. Ten, nine, eight, seven...

I can hear the Plague now, inside the ship, outside the cockpit.

Six, five, four.

They are pounding on the door and screaming, but Kilo is right, they cannot get to me in here. I close my eyes and try to imagine I am back on Ostin, safe below ground, home.

Three, two, one.

There is no escape from the Deadzone.

The Sixth Rush

by Gareth Humphreys

The Rat's Head was the kind of place where the drinks were served in safety glass beakers from behind steel shutters. As Omar walked in, the stench of the place hit the back of his throat. It was the odor of a hundred indentured laborers at the end of a hot day and fifty gallons of cheap booze with an undercurrent of industrial diesel.

He wasn't noticed. Huge, high definition screens all over the bar were showing the game, and almost everyone was watching. Their cheers drowned out the commentary as well as any attempt at conversation.

Omar made his way to the bar. The bartender was a Teraton, a ten foot high lizard with a beaked snout and a mane of horns. This one had mustard-colored scales with orange specks around his snake-like eyes. Above the bar hung the bleached skull of a Veer-Myn rat-man. Omar signed that he wanted a drink. The bartender pulled a pint of pale beer, slid it down the bar to Omar, and offered him the pay terminal. Omar swiped his card, the readout indicating that he had been charged three credits. Omar sighed and picked up his drink.

There was a general cheer, and Omar looked up at the screen. The Starbrite Slyphs were playing the Whitesun Myrmidons, and the Slyph's star striker Jennis Hillsworthy had just put her team three points up. The game was, of course, DreadBall. Fast, exciting, violent, and extremely well financed by the Corporations behind the teams. Players like Hillsworthy counted their salaries in megacredits, and although the game could be dangerous, those that survived could retire with untold wealth at an early age. It was a life that Omar had come so close to experiencing for himself five years ago. Now what? He was counting the credits left over after his rent had gone out, his bills had been paid for, and the interest on his brother Yusuf's bail loan deducted.

Omar took a large swig of his beer. Watery and revolting. Where was Yusuf? Omar made his way into the back room where there

were booths and a pool table. From the corner, a dark haired man in a duster coat and a wide brim hat with dayglow green eyes stared at him over a respirator strapped over his mouth. Omar shifted uncomfortably and broke eye contact, but he could feel the man still scrutinizing him.

A familiar figure clattered to the ground at Omar's feet. Striding out of the crowd came a hulk of a man with a shaved head, a petrol stained vest covering his torso, and tattoos covering his arms. He was sliding a brass knuckleduster on as he advanced. The figure at Omar's feet turned over, revealing the boyish, winsome features of Yusuf. There was blood on his top lip and terror in his eyes.

Omar had only a split second to act. He raised his beaker towards the nearest screen. Hieronimo Kurakin had just scored for the Whitesun Myrmidons.

"Go on Myrmidons! Come on!" he yelled.

In an instant, every conversation was stopped, every cheer was silenced, and every person in the Rat's Head was glaring at Omar with burning hatred.

Yusuf's quizzical gaze said 'Do you have some kind of plan?' Not a smart plan, thought Omar in silent reply as he scanned the room for a way out. The windows were reinforced with steel mesh, but one of them was slightly open. Just like a game of DreadBall. There was his strike zone; he just had to beat the Guards.

As he leapt forward, the man with the brass knuckleduster lurched towards him. Omar shifted his weight and checked the man with his shoulder. Taken by surprise, his haymaker went wide of its mark and Omar slid past, handing off a pink mohawk wearing youth to his right. A curved dagger swung in front of his face. Omar ignored it and grabbed the owner's forehead, pushing his thumb into the man's eye socket. As he went down, Omar sprang past and vaulted over the pool table.

He'd made perhaps ten feet. A gnarled hand gripped his shirt. Omar twisted the wrist, eliciting a shout of pain, but it had slowed him down, and there was a large Grogan in front of him spreading his

wide, powerful arms ready for a tackle. Unlike the others, he was going low. There was no dodging this one. As the pug-faced alien creature dived for his feet, Omar made the only move he could and leapt. To his amazement, he managed to plant his left foot firmly on the dome of the Grogan's head and pushed off, launching him into the air and over his last attacker. He landed awkwardly, and his right knee exploded in pain. In that moment, he was back on the hexagon-marked, floodlit, neodurium floor of the DreadBall arena five years ago.

"It's the sixth rush, and newcomer Omar Nasif is the first to the ball. It's a great pickup, but he's been blindsided! A cynical foul on the new Jack, and he will be out of the game. What a disappointment..."

Omar dived for the window, pushing the pain out of his mind. He managed to slide out, tumbling clumsily onto the tarmac outside, and kicking the window closed with his good leg. There was a satisfying click, which would buy him a few seconds as his pursuers struggled with the handle. Omar hauled himself to his feet and limped off as fast as he could, but he was not followed.

By the time he got near his place, the adrenaline was wearing off, and the knee was getting unbearable. Omar began almost to regret stepping in to help his brother out of yet another deadly scrape.

"Hey! Bro!" came Yusuf's voice. The boy jogged up behind Omar and patted him on his back. "Thanks, my friend. That was a close one! I owe you."

Yusuf's carefree chuckle made Omar's jaw clench. "What the hell were you doing in a place like The Rat's Head?"

"Oh, just a short con. Needed a quick boost."

"A quick boost? That guy was about to put you in the ground!"

"I'd have been fine!"

"Fine? Like the time you got caught posing as a bookmaker for the -"

"I'd have made a megacredit from that if it had worked!"

"You know how much your bail cost?"

"Please, Omar, I don't want to have this conversation."

"Why can't you get a proper job, Yusuf?"

"I don't want a proper job! I don't want to give up on my ambitions, Omar. Not like you did."

Omar clenched his fist, but before he could swing it he was jerked backward. A well muscled, tattooed forearm was pressing on his throat, and his right arm was pinioned to his back by an indomitable grip. In the corner of his eye, Omar could see a brass knuckleduster. The edges of his vision started to turn grey. Yusuf was remonstrating with the man, but Omar couldn't hear the words.

There was a deafening crack, and Omar was released. His attacker fell to the floor, the side of his head a mess of torn flesh. Omar put his hand to his face and realized that there was blood all over it. Yusuf's expression was one of uncomprehending horror.

A figure strode from the twilight, a large caliber pistol, blue smoke rising from the muzzle, held loosely at his side. Omar saw his green eyes first; it was the man who had been watching him in the Rat's Head.

"My name is Tarquin," he said, in a voice like an iron rasp file. "Please, do not move, Omar and Yusuf Nasif. Let me assure you that I would regret killing both of you a good deal less than I regret shooting this unfortunate man, who has never done anything to hurt my interests."

"Have we met?" asked Yusuf levelly. "I think I would remember you."

"You presumably remember the offworld shipment you illicitly redirected last month? I lost considerable capital on that stock."

There was a very long silence.

"Listen, Mr Tarquin," said Omar. "My brother is an idiot. I'll make sure you are paid back in full."

A strange noise, like a ratchet screwdriver, came from Tarquin. It took Omar a moment to realize that he was laughing. "Omar Nasif, latterly a Jack with the Ruskin Renegades. Your first and only professional game was five years ago against the Broadsphere Barbarians. Sucker punched by an Orx Guard in the sixth rush. Retired with serious damage to the cruciate ligaments in your right leg." Tarquin walked over to Omar until he could hear the noise of the respirator. "Oh yes, Mr Nasif. You will indeed make sure I am paid in full."

***

The elevator was made from very old tech. It was basic, rusted, and suspended from an old fashioned steel chain. The emblems stamped onto it in bright yellow were unlike any Omar had seen before, but he was sure that they were safety warnings. He glanced around at his seven teammates in their archaic armor, their DreadBall gloves more like improvised daggers than the energy field projectors Omar was used to. Would they all fit in the elevator? Were they really going to play a game of DreadBall at the bottom of a mineshaft?

"Are there going to be any spectators down there?" he asked.

Kleves, the huge black Guard in the bronze scalemail cuirass, laughed. "You really are a greenhorn, aren't you? This is a great venue. The miners used to play on it, so the whole arena is already built. The crowd get down there by teleport from ordinary terminals. They punch in hacked destination cards. Sends them right down there. The online system records a phony end station. It's completely untraceable."

"Why can't we get down there by teleport?"

"Too easy for the opposition to tamper with. Get us all killed before the game."

‘That was not comforting,’ thought Omar as he stepped onto the elevator and felt it sway gently with his weight. The others followed, and the contraption shook as it descended diagonally slowly into the darkness below.

Omar heard the venue before he saw anything. The roar of the crowd, chanting wordlessly, echoed from every rock.

Kleves exploded with laughter. "No rules, no ref, no mercy! No corporate sponsorship, no advertisement breaks, no men in suits pushing contracts. Just you and the crowd. This is real DreadBall!"

There was a glowing light ahead, which slowly became an archway. The elevator shuddered to a halt and Omar gratefully stepped off onto the firm, unyielding rock. The team stepped through the archway into the light. Omar found himself in a vast, floodlit cavern with a whole DreadBall pitch carved into the very rock beneath his feet. Here and there were stalagmites and even whole columns which interrupted the playing area. Cheap strike posts stood at either end. The other team was already facing them. The crowd surrounded the pitch with nothing but an iron rail to keep them back. Above the crowd was alcoves cut into the rock where more spectators kept watch. The noise was electrifying; the rhythmic chant echoing around the cavern like a rolling thunderclap. It was unlike anything Omar had experienced in the professional game.

The crowd suddenly began to count down. "3...2...1!" A klaxon sounded, the ball appeared from somewhere in the crowd, and Omar's team broke into a run. Swept up by the moment, Omar ran too, his muscles immediately remembering a time when the future was golden and it was all about the game.

***

Inspector Crispian stared at the unkempt man across the table from him. He had at least two days' dark stubble; finger-run black, greasy curls; sallow skin; dirty jacket; dark-rimmed eyes; and a faint smell of body odor was discernible even at this distance. He stroked his moustache and wondered what it cost to be clean these days. Interstellar travel and teleportation were possible, human augmentation available, and instant entertainment at hand

anywhere you were. And yet some people wouldn't even observe basic personal hygiene. Of course, this individual was dirty in other, more fundamental ways.

"Mr. Yusuf Nasif?" he asked.

Yusuf looked up at him as though he was noticing him for the first time. "Yes?"

"I assume from your record that you are familiar with our procedure?"

"Yes, inspector." The voice was barely louder than a whisper.

"You've bitten off somewhat more than you can chew this time, Yusuf. How does a low rent con artist like yourself get mixed up with a character as dangerous as Tarquin?"

Yusuf visibly shivered at the mention of the name.

"Well, Mr. Nasif?"

"I did a hack for some other people about a month back. Redirected a freighter. I didn't know the cargo was his!"

"Who was behind the job?"

"Just a guy I met on the street. Don't know his name. He paid me cash. Instructions in person. Wore a headscarf over his face."

"Do you know what the cargo was?"

"No."

"Brokkrs, Yusuf. Lowlife Forge Father scum. They're a slave caste. Indentured to local gangs. Sure you knew nothing about any of this?"

"I really didn't inspector. I'm sorry I can't be more help."

Crispian smiled and leaned forward. He liked this bit. This was the

part where he played his joker. "You like to portray yourself as a victim of circumstances, Mr. Nasif. Arouse my sympathy. No doubt you knew you were going to be picked up at some point, so you haven't washed for a few days. But I've put away so many incompetent grifters that you guys barely register to me anymore."

He paused until Yusuf started to fidget nervously. "Unfortunately for you, I have the rest of your lousy, amateur con squad in prison right now, and every man jack of them is ready to point the finger to you as the ringleader. You knew what was in that cargo, and you knew who you were screwing over when you hacked into that freighter. Now I know that you and your brother are helping Tarquin to run his illegal game of street DreadBall. I want you to help me string this son of a bitch up."

Yusuf gripped a handful of his own hair tight, and sucked in a deep lungful of air. At last he exhaled and put both hands on the table. "I can give you the time and location of the next game."

"No dice, Yusuf. As soon as Tarquin gets wind of it, he'll go to ground. You are going to lead me and a fire team there in person. If you double cross me, I will kill you."

Yusuf looked him straight in the eyes for the first time. "My brother is in that game!"

"It's you or him, Yusuf."

"I want a writ of immunity. From all past crimes. With your signature on it." Yusuf gasped the words.

Checkmate. "You got it, Mr. Nasif."

***

"Rush Thirteen!" came the strange voice that echoed around the cavern, carrying over the roar of the crowd. Omar looked at the score tracker: a series of colored lights cut into the cave wall at either end of the arena. They were one point down. Omar had made two strikes already; the only strikes his team had managed in the game. The opposition had made three, but they seemed to have

been told to go for blood rather than points.

Omar's team was down from eight players to five. Mina, their nimble Striker, had her brains dashed all over the floor in almost the first rush. Their second Striker, Jared, was stomped not long afterward. He was taken off alive, but his arm was probably broken. It had fallen to Omar and his fellow Jack, Nym, to score, until Nym had his throat slashed. He had staggered off on his own feet, although Omar knew he would bleed out soon unless he was treated.

Kleves had been in a state of euphoric bloodlust. He had broken one of the opposing player's necks and crushed another's skull with his huge fists. Every slam he made seemed to heighten his frenzy.

Omar knew he had to score now to save the game. Handing off an opposing Guard, he snatched the ball from the ground with his glove and changed direction. Two of their Guards opposed him and with linked forearms went to clothesline him at the neck. Omar dived between them and came up in a roll. Keeping his momentum, he charged down their defensive Jack, hoping to knock him over. The wiry little man grabbed onto Omar's shoulder pad, threatening to drag him down. Omar thrust his forehead at the man's nose and was rewarded with a crunch and a wet slap as the blood splashed his face. The man went limp and fell away.

It was an open strike post. Omar knew he could get two points if he made the strike from behind the line. Pausing only a split second, Omar launched the ball, and knew as soon as he did that it was good.

One point ahead! Omar could feel victory was within their grasp. The opposing team seemed to sense this and ignored the ball as it was launched back onto the field with the strange echoing voice announcing the final rush. Instead, all four of their Guards surrounded Kleves, who was cackling like a madman. He laid about him with his fists but could not hold all of them off. One pounced on his face and started to beat him senseless.

Omar ran for the ball, knowing that if he threw it, the rush would end and the game would be over. Out of the corner of his eye, he

could see them lifting Kleves into the air, still thrashing about in his frenzy and whooping jubilantly. Omar dived for the ball and swiped at it with his glove. The rock scraped the skin on his nose and face as he fell, and he heard the klaxon go for the end of the game.

As he got to his feet, Omar saw that he was too late. Kleve's body was impaled on a large stalagmite. The rock all around was slick with blood and torn viscera. The rictus grin on his upside down face was fixed, like some dreadful phantasm from a nightmare. The Guards who had done this to him hoisted their teammate onto their shoulders and waved at the crowd as though they had won the game, and the crowd seemed content to agree with them.

***

"How is your knee?" asked Tarquin.

"My knee? Did you not see what those bastards did to Kleves?" exploded Omar.

"Indeed. A great spectacle, and one which will, I fear, eclipse the memory of our victory today, for which you are chiefly responsible, Mr, Nasif."

"We would not have stood a chance without Kleves."

"Guards do not score strikes, Omar. Guards do not win games. You, however, do. I ask again - how is your knee?"

The knee hurt like hell, but Omar's blood was still up. He would have rather cut his leg off than show any sign of discomfort to Tarquin.

"Did they ever tell you why they had not fixed it?"

Omar frowned. "Knee injuries are tricky."

"Ha! For proletariat medical practices, no doubt. Not for the DreadBall Governing Body. With DGB money, no injuries are particularly tricky. For God's sake, they can even reattach limbs, resuscitate clinically dead patients, and grow new organs inside the

host body in a matter of seconds. For the right price, that is. I believe you know why your knee was not treated, Mr, Nasif. You were an inexperienced player. Not a sound enough investment for their Corporation underwriters."

Omar clenched his jaw and balled his fists. If he had still been wearing his DreadBall glove, he would have stabbed Tarquin in that moment.

A bald man in a black business suit announced himself by knocking on the open door. Omar's rage was derailed by the sudden realization that he recognized him. "Please, come in," said Tarquin. The man did so.

"Thanks for the tip… What do I call you here?" he asked.

"Tarquin, if you please," said Tarquin stiffly.

"Of course. And I will make sure that our deal proceeds according to schedule. My partners are very keen."

"You have my thanks."

"Good to see you again, Omar," said the man, and he walked out.

"I know him! He works for the DGB!" said Omar.

"Of course. Our worlds are not so unconnected as you might think."

Omar could not believe what he had just seen. How could a DGB official be mixed up with this seedy, highly illegal version of DreadBall?

"Now, permit me to change the subject," Tarquin was saying. "Mr. Nasif, you are, to me, a sound investment. I am going to repair your knee. Tomorrow."

***

It took a good few minutes before Omar felt awake enough to start to remember what had happened to him that day. He had been

under a general anesthetic, he was sure, and he was in a hospital. The rest was a bit of a blur. Memories kept floating up in his mind in a jumbled order. There was the fight at the Rat's Head. The conversation with Tarquin about his leg. The look on Kleve's dead face. The day he scored his first strike in the little leagues. The time Yusuf tried to kill himself. The day he found out that his Pro DreadBall career was over… that had been in a room very much like this one.

A pretty young doctor with caring blue eyes had come over and manipulated his leg. Omar had tried not to wince, but the pain had been too much, despite her gentleness. She had put her hand comfortingly on his shoulder and assured him that everything was going to be alright.

There had been a painting of an otter on the wall adjacent to his bed. Why an otter, of all things? He must have stared at that thing for so long that every brushstroke was painted directly onto the canvas of his memory. Eventually, an elderly man in a grey suit and spectacles had come to his bedside with a clipboard, announcing himself as being from the Ruskin Corporation, and enquiring after his wellbeing.

Omar had replied that he felt very well indeed, thank you.

Was Mr. Nasif aware of the extent of his injuries?

He was aware of a not inconsiderable discomfort in his right knee.

There followed a clinical description of the medical situation.

Omar had remained silent.

It was with the utmost regret that the elderly grey-suited man informed him that the Ruskin Corporation were not able to assist him financially towards the treatment of such a tricky injury. Under the terms of his contract with the Ruskin Corporation as an athlete for the DreadBall team, he was entitled to a redundancy payment equal to three months wages. Please could he sign this affidavit to indicate that he understood.

The present started to come back a little into focus. Omar looked down at his leg. It felt strange. That was nothing new as there had been many times when Omar had felt like his leg did not belong to him, but when he bent the knee, the dull throb which he was used to was not there. He had carried it with him for five years, like a chronic case of toothache: always there in the background, sometimes pushing its way to the foreground violently with a click of cartilage whenever Omar twisted it just the wrong way. Now he felt nothing. It was like having a completely new leg. No. A completely new body.

A tall, grey-skinned Judwanese alien in a medic's coat appeared at his bedside. "Please not to move the leg before healing is occurring," it said. "Kindly to rest now." It played with the console by Omar's head, and a feeling of tranquility blanketed over his mind. Omar turned onto his side, and noticed for the first time that Nym, his teammate with the cut to his throat, was in the next bed along.

"Still alive," he whispered hoarsely. "At least one more game for us, hey Omar?"

"Sure, one more game," said Omar, before he drifted off to sleep.

***

It was the next morning. Omar was reading a news report on the local info hub without much interest. Truthfully, all he wanted to do was to go for a run. It had been too long since he had experienced a real runner's high without the accompaniment of excruciating pain, but his Judwanese doctor had forbidden him to leave his bed for the rest of the day to ensure that the treatment had taken. Omar knew in his marrow that it had. He felt ready for anything and containing his excitement was now his biggest struggle.

"Hey, bro!" came the familiar voice of Yusuf. There was a certain swagger about him today. He was clean shaven, and his hair had been cut. He was wearing a clean shirt and a black suit, although he still managed to wear it with an air of youthful nonchalance. "How is the knee?"

Omar smiled. "Best it has been in five years. And how are you doing?"

"Great. Being a fixer suits me. Better than grifting by a long way."

"The way you do it, they're probably the same thing," said Omar.

"Well, the people I'm working for are not the GCPS Central Bank, you know."

"So," Omar lowered his voice. "Do you know how many more matches I have to get through before Tarquin lets you off the hook?"

"Please don't say his name, Omar. Enforcement patrols are listening everywhere."

"Did you see the last game? It was a bloodbath. How many more do I need to survive?"

"I thought you'd be happy, Omar. You have a new knee. You're playing DreadBall again."

"Happy? Look, Yusuf. It's not that I'm being ungrateful for what he's done for me. But I don't want to end up spitted on a rock!"

"Kleves knew what he was getting into. He was a volunteer."

"I know! These people are crazy, Yusuf. They don't seem to care if they live or die, just as long as they get to play one more game! I'm not one of them."

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for things to turn out like this."

"I know, I know. Just tell me - how many more games?"

Yusuf paused. "Listen. The next game is special. Something big is going to go down. If we both keep our heads, we will be able to walk away from this in less than a week."

"What do you mean, something big? What has Tarquin got

planned?"

"Don't say his name! Just trust me, Omar."

"Trust you?"

Yusuf checked his watch. "Listen, I have to meet a sponsor in ten minutes. Remember what I said, brother. Bye."

"Yusuf!" Omar called, but his brother didn't break his stride as he left the ward.

***

There he was at last. Omar had waited in the alleyway by the Rat's Head for hours for a glimpse of Tarquin, and there he was. The brim of his hat was angled low to obscure his eyes, and the collar of the duster turned up. Omar waited until he was a discreet distance away, then fell into step behind him.

Within five minutes, he found himself in the interstellar dock district. Huge, dirty space freighters like oily hornets roared overhead every few minutes. The buildings here were packed close together made up of warehouses made from cheap, puce-colored prefab plasterboard held together over iron girder skeletons. Piles of steel shipping crates of various colors littered the area haphazardly. Everything here was coated in the grime generated by engine wash.

Tarquin stepped inside a small office outbuilding, and Omar slowed down his approach. The only window was blackened almost to the point of opacity, and Tarquin had closed the door behind him. Crouched beneath the window, Omar could just about hear a conversation. The second voice, Omar quickly realized, was the DGB official Omar had seen meeting with Tarquin after the match.

"Is everything set for the game?" Tarquin was saying.

"Everything. The mine venue has been perfectly brought up to spec. Do you have a viable team for this level of competition?"

"Don't patronize me. I've put together an excellent side. I even have

one or two ex-professionals."

"Nasif."

"Yes, he will be playing. As per our agreement, you will provide me with DGB grade equipment."

"It's already delivered."

"Good. Now, as we discussed, there may be a small problem during the sixth Rush, but I have the matter well in hand. It will not interrupt proceedings. Here is how we will manage the situation."

Omar decided to have a look in through the window. The DGB man had his back to him, and Tarquin had taken off his hat and was leaned over the table in profile. Only, it wasn't Tarquin. The eyes had turned from green to blue, but the respirator was still there. But without the hat, he looked very different. His scalp did not have dark hair but strange, brown spikes, and the shape of his forehead was… inhuman. Tarquin was an alien for sure; one that Omar had never seen before.

"Did you hear that?" The DGB man said as he came over to the window, but Omar was no longer there.

***

Inspector Crispian tightened the strap on his armor and loosened his sidearm in its holster. If all went to plan, he would not have to use it this evening, but he was prepared to if circumstances demanded. He nodded at the Sergeant whose face was obscured beneath the all-encompassing pale blue helmet. The Sergeant shouldered his assault rifle and gestured to his men, five of them, all armed and armored in the same way. They took positions around the entrance to the mine.

Crispian turned to Yusuf. “You had better be right about this, Nasif. A DreadBall game in an abandoned mine? You have got to be kidding me.”

“It isn’t so far fetched, Inspector. In the early days of DreadBall,

venues like this were commonplace. Troopship holds, warehouses, shuttle landing pads… anywhere you got a large enough space near a manual workforce."

"I don't need the history lesson, Nasif. Just know that if you are wrong, this is a great place to hide your body. OK, Sergeant. Move out!"

The tunnel was long and dark, and the eerie green glow from the night vision incorporated into the helmets of the men was barely enough to see by. Crispian, despite himself, kept his hand on the grip of his pistol. After a couple of minutes, Crispian's pulse began to quicken at the distant sound of hundreds of voices chanting. They'd found it.

By and by, the tunnel widened into an antechamber. The place was lit, and several suited men sat at portable tables operating laptop computers. A game of DreadBall was displayed on a large screen screwed into the wall. It was from a cave nearby.

"Is there a problem, officer?" one of them asked.

"This is an unauthorized DreadBall game!" announced Crispian. "Everyone here is under arrest!"

"There's some mistake, officer," said the man, calmly. "This is not an illegal game. This is the annual Sphere 29 DreadBall Heritage Exhibition Game, and it is completely authorized by the DGB."

"What?"

"Please, sir. Feel free to inspect the paperwork."

***

It had been a glorious game. Omar was wearing standard DGB Jack armor in the black and gold of the Starbrite Slyphs. Their opposition was the Slyph's B Team, playing in the red 'away' colors of the side. No one had died that game, although there had been a couple of nasty injuries, and he had been benched himself for a few Rushes to recover from a nasty slam. The Sixth Rush had come and

gone, and despite Omar's misgivings, nothing had happened. In the final phases of the game, Omar had even managed a three point strike that, for awhile at least, had put their team ahead. Best of all, the knee had held up perfectly. Afterward, Tarquin's DGB contact had handed him a business card and asked him to get in touch about trying out for a professional side.

Most of the post match buzz was now about the venue. How had this arena, from the very roots of DreadBall itself, been forgotten? How had they rediscovered it? Didn't it go to show the universality of DreadBall, how it brought together people from all walks of life? How far had the game come since its humble origins? The pundits went on and on in this kind of vein for some time.

A mustached man in a police uniform approached Omar. "Mr. Nasif? Inspector Crispian. I need a word."

Omar followed him to one of the teleport pads which had been used to transport the crowd in. The policeman pressed a destination card into his hand. Omar punched the card into the terminal, and stood on the plate.

With the blinding flash and the stomach drop which was customary during teleport, Omar found himself in a police station.

The inhabitants of the station turned around and stared at this strange man in the DreadBall uniform for a second, then continued with their business. Crispian followed him a moment later.

"Mr. Nasif," he said. "I have your brother in custody. He has caused me a lot of problems today. I was supposed to make the arrest of my life, and then I discover that the illegal game of DreadBall I was tracking down is, in fact, legit. Yusuf claims not to know anything about it, but even if he's lying, I can't prosecute him, because he has been given a Writ of Immunity. So what I am going to do instead is this. I am going to shoot him in the stomach and let him bleed to death slowly. Then I'm going to kill you as well, unless you give me Tarquin, now."

***

The door of the office building flew off its hinges under the weight of Inspector Crispian's kick. He entered a split second afterward, pistol held before him. The lights were out everywhere. "Tarquin!" he yelled. "Where are you?"

"Over here, Inspector," came a calm, mechanical voice from an adjoining room. Cautiously, Crispian approached. The door was open. Rounding the corner, he caught a momentary glimpse of Tarquin inserting a destination card into a teleport terminal, before he disappeared. Where had he gone? Quickly, Crispian brought up the previous destination station on the terminal's computer screen. For a second, the screen went blank, then it flashed up a message. Crispian cursed and smashed his fist into the screen, cracking the glass.

The message had read: "Nice try, Inspector. Warm regards, Blaine."

***

Omar arrived, panting, at his own front door, and checked his watch. Five miles in less than half an hour. Not too bad, and absolutely no pain from his knee. He went inside and mopped the sweat from his face with the towel he had hung there before he left.

"Hi, Omar," said Yusuf from the kitchen area.

"How did you get in?" asked Omar.

Yusuf grinned disarmingly. "I thought I'd drop by to say thank you for everything you've done for me. For the past few years, in fact."

"Yeah? In the last few days I've been in a bar fight, and an extreme game of DreadBall. I've been employed by a hardened criminal and threatened by a police officer. So please, Yusuf. Spare me the thanks and just stay out of trouble, okay?"

Yusuf was quiet for a moment. "Tarquin, or Blaine as he also seems to be called, is off world. My sources tell me he won't be back for a long time."

"Well good. Hopefully he won't look me up if he needs an extra Jack

when he returns."

"Me too. Look, I know I won't be able to make good with you just by saying sorry. But anyway, I want you to have this." He handed Omar a charge card.

Omar didn't look at it. "What's this?"

"It's half my winnings from the first game. I put everything I had on you scoring the winning strike. The bookie had never heard of you, so I got really great odds. Should be enough to keep you going until you get a place on a DreadBall squad."

Omar smiled. "And what about you, bro? How are you going to spend your winnings?"

Yusuf laughed. "One credit at a time!" he said.

After Yusuf had left, Omar took out the business card he had been given by Tarquin's tame DGB official. With a sigh, he turned it over. On the reverse were three handwritten words.

"One more game."

Iron, Steel and Stone

A Warpath Story

by Richard August

The hulking, armoured form of the Iron Ancestor stumbled out of the smoke. There were laser scars across the chest-piece that protected the pilot within; one arm was a blackened tusk of warped Vasted steel. The mechanised brute limped on legs pock-marked with the craters left by shrapnel. Inside the reinforced chassis of the machine, Goril Kileen struggled to breathe. How many of the Veer-myn were chasing him now? How many of his brothers had he been forced to leave behind; their bodies savaged by the strange toxin-weaponry of enemies who had clawed their way up from the earth. Ambushed. Strafed by weapons which made the air thick with radiation, with sickness.

He had watched the flesh of Amril Kilthrus try to withdraw from the bones beneath it, bubbling and roiling as thickened, mustard-yellow gas had swept over him. Kileen had run, the stout remorseless legs of his Ancestral armour allowing him to break through the circuit of Veer-myn gunners; Nightmares, he had thought, as he had crushed one beneath the splayed foot of his suit. The glade-issue respirators which had been fitted into his control unit had filtered out most of the thickened fug of poison, but even then, he could taste it, on his tongue, every time he inhaled. He'd tasted blood.

He limped on, deeper into the derelict city. It was old, this place. Even as his one good arm, the one which clutched his shock-hammer, demolished the side wall of some ancient temple, he could sense the years protesting. The years were always protesting. That is what the Corporation and their damned allies would never understand- even as they spread and bartered their way towards the universe's edge- they did not listen to the crying of the years, the curving desolation of time whittling away at survival, at hope.

Kileen's people had no such illusions. Time had taught them that in the harshest of all languages- destruction. How many star-systems

had the Forge Fathers watched perish before they had realised that Time could not be delayed or appeased; it could only be worshipped and obeyed. As the dust from the ruined wall settled around him, Kileen cursed himself and swore to bring forward his death by a minute, in atonement.

Behind him, his sensors estimated a mile or less, he could hear the low swarm-murmur of Veer-myn. They were coming, ever nearer. On, he told himself, on, on, on.

The Iron Ancestral armour wheezed as it pressed through the narrow avenue formed by two sculptures. What were they of? One seemed to be of some colossal wyrm, the other…a dragon, perhaps, like the humans sometimes talked of? Or…an abyssal mollusc of the kind his father had used to catch in the lakes? Peculiar creatures. The architecture of the city reminded him of civilisations he had learned of so long ago now- before he was a Steel Warrior. Before he was anything.

As a child, looking into cryo-spheres and watching the glitter of crystallised time he'd seen them. Huge, stately buildings; conical, cupreous towers which stretched upwards, strung with jewelled bridges which spanned miles upon which information and minds darted in electric-impulse. Mind-Cities they had been called. Was that why he had been sent here, to claim old knowledge for the archives? More fallen statuary was ground into nothingness as he staggered onward. He did not curse himself this time; no point in removing moments from his life, his suit was in no state to avoid such objects. He had ordered the small auto-repair shrikes to begin their work, but, moving as quickly as he was, there was little they could do.

The shrikes were largely concentrating on his ruined arm, suturing the vast rent its destruction had left in the suit's integrity, unable to improve his speed or stability until he stopped moving. He pressed on, the noise of Veer-myn chattering growing ever louder; they would be on him soon, he knew. Or at least, whichever of them had been dispatched as scouts. They were vicious, cunning creatures, the rat-men. They struck with precision and their hateful chemical weapons; scorching flesh and cracking even the finest armour of the Forges.

Leering faces watched him from high roofs; gargoyles and monsters etched into the rock. He longed simply to turn and fight. This place was, he realised, beginning to get to him. It was an unsettling place and Kileen was alone and being hunted. He did not know why his Commander had insisted they come here, dragging the heaviest weapons they could with them. He did not know why his Commander had insisted that each of the Forge soldiers he was taking with him have the berserker's mark etched onto their shoulder-guards- the stark, curving line, defacing any other clan-markings. The berserker's mark, time's curve.

It meant that the cause to come was more important than the life which the soldier had lived before. It was the most sacred mark of his Forge-clan. And he bore it now; a distinctive cut into the living Vasted steel. Not that anyone other than one of his Forge brothers would be able to tell, given the ruins his Ancestral armour was in.

Suddenly, there was movement ahead- a jagged, hissing noise and then a furred form slunk into the open. They were bigger than humans, the Veer-myn; what had bred them? What genetic mutation had brought them, spewing their filth, into the universe? He paused now, watching the enemy through his viewing-panel, as the command-shrike scanned for other foes. He moved the arm which still functioned, the shock-hammer whining in bloody anticipation. He hoped that Time still spread out before him and that the weapon-god guiding his hammer was watching attentively. He charged.

The Veer-myn, in its shapeless garment of faded yellow, fired its gun; a blazing warning-code shot along the mind-link which connected Kileen to his suit. It was a code attuned precisely to his brain-function, understandable only by him; even if another Forge brother were hooked to this system, he would never interpret the relayed messages- on this occasion however, the data which screamed into his neural centres was laughably simple: *avoid*. Legs already damaged gave a metallic scream as Kileen hurled himself sideways; hydraulics bursting as their battle-corroded auxiliary lines failed.

The slopping, boiling explosion which just missed Kileen's flying

form incinerated a nearby temple column, rending apart solid rock and passing through the chiselled body of yet another misshapen carved creature. The rat creature gave a snap of its jaws in frustration- the sharp slap of taut muscle and overlong-tongue reminding Kileen horribly of the sound Kilthrus' flesh had made as it had boiled. Another string of neural-code reached his brain- *Scourger*, it said*, the weapon is a Scourger; if it hits you, you die*. He silently thanked the suit's analysis centres for this second piece of information. Using the hammer as a crutch, Kileen pushed the Iron Ancestor to its feet again. The Veer-myn was reloading but slowly; the rat-thing wore a backpack, which it was hitting with growing desperation, between shaking the barrel of its Scourger and looking towards Kileen.

Forcing the steel suit back into a lumbering run, Kileen bore down on his enemy. The Veer-myn, realising his weapon was useless, flung it aside and, snarling, leapt at the Forge Father's most magnificent creation. It was fast, moving with the feral celerity of a Guidean pole cat and it avoided the first clumsy sweep of Kileen's hammer. Claws, tipped with some sort of acid, scored the underside of the Ancestor's mid-section as the Veer-myn- a dishevelled mass of frantic aggression- tried to avoid the shock-hammer. Kileen brought it around again, the energy exuded by the hammer displacing air and then displacing Veer-myn brain matter as it crunched into the creature's skull.

Bright red against dirty-yellow; the rat man collapsed, into the dusty street. The scanner whined in alarm; two more figures clutching long-barrelled scourgers were already moving along the street, weapons raised and firing. Kileen was running now- focusing on the street ahead of him, committing his scanners to detecting if any other Veer-myn had managed to get ahead of him, as the one he had just killed had. He increased the force-levels of the shock-hammer, making the few drops of blood which had managed to adhere to the metal shudder free- no sense in leaving a trail for them to follow.

The deeper he pressed into the city, the stranger the place got. More and more statues decorated the avenues, the buildings became increasingly ornate and increasingly strange. What had the Forge Fathers identified as being worth their attention in this place? True, it was a peculiar place, but it did not seem as technologically

advanced as even the Corporation, let alone possess secrets worthy of being stored in the inner recesses of the Forge archives. The statues were uglier here, older and cruder. As though, as the civilisation which had made this place had grown in sophistication and stature, they had also become more beautiful. A strange thought.

It reminded him of the Old Gods of the sagas; their forms changing, falling from them, always being remade in the heat of the forge. Until Time seized even them, fixed them into a single form and left them to decay. Time, he worshipped, as did all his people- the only truth was the passing of time, the dwindling of history. What did these Veer-myn believe in? Were there brains capable of such metaphysical thought?

Movement was becoming increasingly difficult. Ruptured hydraulics and calcified armour was slowing him down. Each step was more difficult, drained him further. But he couldn't stop- the moment he stopped, those pursuing him would be able to pick him off at a distance. That was no way to die. That was no way to end your Time living. No honour there, no story to be told, no saga to be sung. If he could get to somewhere which might nullify the power of their scourgers, force them to come close and submit to the ministrations of his hammer…he couldn't run much longer. Time to choose Kileen, he told himself, time to choose where you die.

The Iron Ancestor lurched horribly as Kileen forced it to turn to the right, into the ruined doorway of a tall, decorously proportioned building. The place was littered with statues, hunkering shapes of strange proportions. He did not have time to investigate. His suits command-shrike was relaying the detected approach of half a dozen Veer-myn. Plaster, stone and gleaming shards of silicate showered the Ancestral suit's feet at each step- the grav-locators and stabilisers ripping up the floor as he shambled forwards. A small aperture in the dark room gave way to stairs. Kileen turned the suit about, and backed slowly up the stairs; realising quickly what he was intending, the command-shrike cut the integrated lighting panels which clung to the exterior of his suit and returned the place to darkness.

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There was no sound of claws, no strangled swarm-language. Only the coded warnings of his scanners, imparted directly into his brain, told him that the Veer-myn were upon him. Even with the aural-calibrator at its maximum he could hear nothing. He could see nothing. Saving power for the coming fight, he had let most of the systems rest for a few minutes. He was just Kileen now, Kileen and the sensors, waiting for death in the dark. He almost wondered if he were already dead- if it weren't for the bright afterglow of coded exchanges with the sensors he might have believed it.

Anvil-priests had said that, at the end of Time, darkness would be the only substance left; Forge Fathers lived in the dark most of the time, in obedience with time. But, the Priests insisted, when time ended then the Old Gods would awaken from their death-sleep and remake the world and gather the spirits of the Forge to them. Kileen wondered if this was what waiting for the Old Gods would be like; a permanently tense nothingness. Finally, the aural-calibrators heard something; the sensors had already detected the movement but the sound let him know it was real. The faint rasp of breath, the quiet click of claws. From the darkness came brilliant light. The Veer-myn were searching for him.

The suit's power systems raged back into life. As they did, Kileen saw a first Veer-myn before him, panicked, blinded. The rat-thing had been slowly climbing the stairs, cautiously hunting for his quarry. The whine of the shock-hammer seemed deafening after the near-total silence, a humming like that of struck metal filled the Iron Ancestor's innards. Magnetised joints flipped the hammer forward, striping the air with its speed, shattering bone and thundering through the meat of one of the creatures who had slain his Forge-brothers. Three or four he had killed now. Not yet a saga's worth; not yet true vengeance but a start.

A second Veer-myn stuck its furred head around the corner, made reckless by surprise and Kileen took its head off with a single blow. Its body fell away, out of sight, and Kileen cursed- any uncertainty and surprise in his assault was lost now. As though the Veer-myn had heard this, a flurry of scourger fire deluged his position- or close to it. Kileen could feel the heat of the intense laser fire, could feel it even through the artificial coolant spores which the suit released. There were snarls of command below and the flurry of

laser fire stopped. More instructions issued in the guttural, barking voice of the rat-men.

Kileen wondered whether to charge down upon the enemy, relying on momentum and surprise to protect him from the mass of scourgers- or to wait. He had the best position- he held the higher ground, he could not be overwhelmed with numbers…and yet how long did he have before Veer-myn with more powerful weapons simply destroyed the building itself, bringing it down upon him and forcing him out into massed laser fire? Or until they climbed the building and trapped him, on both sides?

Whispers of statistical advice twined through his synapses, communiques from the command-shrike data banks which scanned the room where his enemy had congregated. They were preparing something- strategies to cut his Time short. His decision was made for him- laser fire began to smash into the walls and stairs around him, a shredding storm of seething red light which ripped at the stone and steel he stood on. They were trying to drive him out, he realised, or, at least, expose him to their guns.

Unconsciously, he tried to return fire with the hailstorm cannon which had been ripped from him, leaving behind merely a nub of smelted steel. Sensors and receptors began to confer, noisily, in his own head before he had even decided what it was he was about to do. *Inadvisable*, his command-shrike whittered at him. Kileen did not care any longer; he was almost laughing. This was war! This was the way a hero from the sagas would die. If this was the end of his Time, he would make it stretch to accommodate his story; he would make Time slow…

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A few feet below him the withering barrage of laser fire continued. Below him the stunned, elongated heads of the Veer-myn gazed upwards. Below him, a rain of debris. Below him one of the furred murderers found his arm broken by a hunk of flying stone. Below him panic and madness and disorder. He landed, leading with his shoulder, driving it into the chest of a startled Veer-myn, and watched it vanish in a haze of blood and fragments of bone. Despite his efforts, Kileen could not prevent the Ancestor from rolling over,

sprawling as the weight of the suit and momentum of his fall carried him beyond balance.

Diverting the last of the suit's energy resources to his claw-arm and the hoists embedded in the suit's legs, he gradually levered himself up. It was taking too long, he knew. He was too damaged for this. Already the rat-men were gathering, the surprise and alarm at his sudden emergence through the stone wall dissipating quickly. One short burst of laser fire opened a ragged gash in the Vasted steel of the Ancestor's side, a fissure through which Kileen could taste air scented with dust and ruined flesh. He flung himself at a pair of his assailants, shock-hammer smashing one to the ground and leaving the second with a face which, though once been convex, was suddenly concave.

More scourger fire lacerated the overlapping steel plates which constituted his spine. He staggered, trying to turn but unable to- some component of the machine's complex cybernetics had failed- or, some tiny minutely forged cog had, under the pressure, expired. The Anvil Priests knew that all technology would do this: metal and the things made from it experienced Time as did the bodies of the Forge Fathers.

Sustained fire ripped away at his back plates. He could not move; or at least, could not do so with any hope of avoiding the sustained fire of the anvil-cursed rat men. Seeing him apparently broken, three Veer-myn charged- leaping and clawing at Kileen's Ancestral armour, flickering shriek-knives drawn and keening. Kileen waited. The rat things clambered over him, the laser fire ceasing.

Through the gaping wound in the Ancestor's armour, a furred hand reached up, groping towards him. Flashing code-warnings burst in his brain as shriek-knives began to carve at the armour, trying to open it up. They were all upon him now; he could see it on the sensors. The command-shrike confirmed it; no more Veer-myn lurked waiting. They were all stabbing and slashing at him now. Urging the power-cells into one last surge, Kileen struck.

The shock-hammer swept upwards from where it had hung, apparently useless by his side, carving through the ribs of one of the rat men. Another he crippled with a savage kick from his

mechanical legs. He wondered if this was the closest he would come to taking another step. The Veer-myn were stabbing relentlessly at the thickened cable which powered the shock-hammer as he tried to raise it to deliver another killing blow. He managed it, just, driving his lone weapon into the stomach of one of the rat men he had had managed to shake free from where it clung to his torso, mashing its insides against the stone floor. Even as he did so, he felt the hammer's force dying. Goril Kileen was weaponless.

He lashed out again, relying merely on the hammer's bulk and weight to hurt something; bone broke as he swung about him but too stiffly, too slowly for him to be any real threat to the lithe forms of the Veer-myn. They carefully skirted the clumsy half-circle his Ancestor could still render dangerous. The end was coming, he knew it. With horrible deliberateness, one of the surviving Veer-myn sliced apart the auto-joists which acted like tendons in the Ancestor's joints. Kileen fell slowly, inexorably, backwards. For the first time since he was a Steel warrior, he stared up at his enemy; ruined, broken. His Time was over. He waited for the darkness.

The click of claws on steel; sensors told him that his enemy was climbing upon him, inspecting their kill. He thanked the command-shrike, sardonically, for this information and willed it to silence. When his Time came, he would face it alone, ready for the darkness, ready to wait for the Old Gods to come for him. Through the flickering viewing panel, he saw a verminous face staring down at him. Was it smiling?

Certainly, Kileen thought, that strange twisting of thin lips and exposed teeth, reminded him of a smile. It clutched its scourger; badly designed he thought, abstractedly, crude. Powerful, perhaps, but crude. Shameful to die at the hand of such a weapon. The Gods of the Forge would not be pleased. But what did it matter? Deep within the muzzle of the scourger he saw the glow of laser power, swelling, gathering. Soon it was too bright for Kileen to look at. He closed his eyes and waited.

A hideous grinding noise. Was it the back-pack the Veer-myn was wearing? He could see the effect its power cells were having; energising the acidic slop which sloshed back and forth in the gun's viewing chamber. Kileen saw the expression on the rat man's face change from something like gloating triumph to…panic, alarm? A

shape lunged out of the darkness and the rat man who had been standing on the ruined carcass of his Ancestral armour was gone. There was a thin shrieking from somewhere in the chamber, somewhere behind him. Prone as he was, he could see nothing.

He tried to will his sensors back to life, but only a desultory code-line spilt across his brain: *we have come to the end of our Time, Brother.* Over and again. The stubborn message of the dead. Accompanying the shrieking, whining sound was a dripping noise, now. Wetness. Where was the other Veer-myn? Was this some internecine fighting? He couldn't see! He had to see! For a final time he tried to force the Iron Ancestor back to life. The command-shrike simply repeated its message; the Ancestor's soul had fled. Now Kileen was trapped in a metal husk.

He sent out a last thought command: eject, and felt the last vestiges of life in the machine congeal, in order to thrust him upwards and outwards. He tumbled out of the Ancestor's chest, the fine tracery of mental link-ups ripped out from his skull as he fell into the spiteful heat of the city. He almost howled as the world, unmediated by the mechanical refinements of the Ancestral suit, pressed in upon his every nerve ending. For a moment, his short, stout body almost doubled up into itself as he knelt, fingers pressed into ears and eyes, trying to shut it out.

The pain of an unmodulated world gradually receded. Usually, those privileged to pilot the Iron Ancestors would divest themselves of the suits in the blackness of the Long Barrows- extensive hangars where the hundreds of other Ancestral suits waited to be called to offer themselves up to the ministrations of Time and the glory of the Old Gods. He looked around him- even the dimness of this chamber stung his eyes- looking for his enemies, waiting for the last flash of laser fire. He could smell something; the Forge Father's sense of smell was legendary. Even atrophied as his was by years of relying on the augmented senses of the Iron Ancestor, he couldn't miss this. An acrid, bilious scent. Veer-myn musk; tang of piss and fear. And something else; a deep, iron scent. The aroma of a spent seam in a mine; wasted minerals. Blood. Lots of blood.

He tried his enervated limbs and found them steady enough to walk. His night vision was beginning to reassert itself, remembering how to pierce the darkness, the means by which Forge Fathers had

avoided the deep things for so many millennia. Then Kileen saw the hunched, shadow shape which had snatched the Veer-myn and wished his eyes had failed to attune themselves to the darkness.

It was, he realised at once, one of the statues he had seen when he had entered the room. A hunched, hideous thing; a mass of horribly proportioned legs and arms, a head which seemed to be a mouth, jewelled stalactite teeth. And, in its hands- rocky outcrops from which sprouted hooks of stone- was the still breathing Veer-myn. The rat man's chest had been ripped open, and the yawning mouth of the living statue was chewing at ragged innards. The terrible grinding noise he had heard earlier, Kileen realised, was the statue *moving*. Every minor gesture elicited a scraping, rasping howl of tortured stone; it was the sound which a tunnel made before it began to collapse in on itself.

Kileen began to back away from the statue, which continued to consume the Veer-myn's flesh, teeth rutilant with viscera. Iron warriors did not run, Kileen repeated to himself, they did not turn and run in fear. He nearly stumbled, disturbing dust and the detritus of battle. The statue paused for a moment at the sound, its blind ravening maw snapping at the air as though trying to taste his location. Soon however, the attractions of the ripped Veer-myn flesh drew it back to finish its meal.

A second time he nearly stumbled, the floor suddenly slippery beneath his feet. He glanced down. He was standing in the midst of a second Veer-myn corpse. Blood slicked the floor, remnants of fur and one small, nacreous eyeball decorated the reddened path he was trying to follow to the doorway. Iron warriors do not run. Still the sounds of grinding stone, the pliancy of yielding flesh, reached his ears. Do not run. Do not run. It had become his mantra, the only thought which filled his brain. Everything else was merely instinct now.

Footstep, each one louder than he would have thought possible, footstep, footstep. Don't run. Don't run. Another step, another. The cold, sharp sound of his foot striking stone; the crunch of… something, beneath each lowered heel. Don't run. Scrambling hands, feeling behind him for the door. Where was it? Where was it? A sudden snapping noise…had the creature heard him? No; the statue had made the noise, extinguishing the mewling of the

eviscerated Veer-myn, at last. Now there was only the harshness of stone chewing, slowly, in the shadows. Hands feeling along the wall. Then emptiness. Footstep. Don't run. Air. *Air*. He was out. Kileen repressed the urge to raise his voice in ululation. The living statue was still just within.

Outside, the sun was bright enough to tarnish the ornate, metallic spirals and the stone buildings which made up the city. He breathed in deeply, once, twice, and began to march, quickly, away from the slaughter he had begun and perhaps, still had the Time to escape. The city was silent now- no longer redolent with the scratching swarm-voice of Veer-myn. He passed through the deserted streets, feeling now, more strongly than ever, how alien the place was. What had that creature been? He could recall every hearing of anything similar, even in the most obscure and esoteric of the sagas; even in the thousands of cryo-spheres he had stared into, learning everything he could, secreting it in his mind for when it was needed. Nothing which resembled that *thing*.

The darkness was behind him now. Kileen focused on that. Rescue teams would be coming soon. If he could make the edge of the city, lie low for tonight, he would be able to search tomorrow for other survivors, make it off this hideous world. The day was slowly beginning to ebb from the sky, the sunlight becoming pallid. Kileen ambled along wide parades, along which a series of pedestals stretched upwards towards the open sky. Another of the odd, angular temples he had seen earlier bordered the route. It was a peculiar place; the deeper he drew into it, the stranger it became. Had he not passed the centre of the place, yet?

Kileen stopped for a moment, trying to orient himself, to gain some idea of where he might be, where he was heading. This part of the city was different again; even the geometry of the architecture unsettled him, no Forge possessed such angles; no Anvil-Priest would tolerate the ugly intersection of planes and angles. This place was wrong; Kileen turned about. Should he go back? Head back towards the place where he and his Forge-brothers had entered…it seemed so long ago now, but it could only be a few hours. Better that than proceed into this dank, disturbing place. There were still strange features in the architecture there of course. The faces which had leered…from…every building…There were no statues here; no demonic visages loomed from cornices; no anthropoid figures

hunkered in corners, or grouped together in doorways. This was, Kileen realised, the first empty street he had encountered in this entire, anvil-cursed conurbation. The faces, the gargoyle statues, from every building and every street, road and alleyway, had gone.

He felt sweat- the sweat of fear, not the clean perspiration of the forge- start on his brow and palms. Goril Kileen began to run, his legs as short as they were pounding through the ruins of the city, ignoring his exhaustion as he sprinted back, back, to where he had come from, to where his brothers had died. He did not care any longer if the toxins of the Veer-myn burned his lungs out. He did not care if the rat men savaged him with their teeth. He simply ran from the empty, shadowed street as the sound of living stone howling in vile chorus started to fill the air.

Ambush at Outpost 7

by Austin Peasley

Captain Fang screamed, his voice cracking a bit in terror as the enormous warped Plague beast soars down from the heavens. A string of audiomechanical curses comes blaring out of the loudspeaker on the side of the Stunt-bot as Kilpatrick tries to bring the bot's haphazard cannons to bear on the overhead menace.

Nearby, another scream echoing his own can be heard reverberating in a secure permasteel crate; One of the stunty snipers, judging from the nearby discarded rifle. He doesn't blame the cowardly git, and would have joined him in the relative safety of a similar crate had there been one of sufficient size. The chaos of the battle is everywhere, flaring in orange muzzle flashes, the glint of the dying sunset light on purple flesh and bone-white chitinous armor.

Taking in a gulping breath of air, Fang can't help but taste the battle as well. Familiar, almost comforting smells of cordite and plasma ozone mingle with the sickly-sweet smell the Plague seem to emanate. He remembered hearing somewhere that Plague actually infected others with a virus, and a tiny, queasy part of the back of his mind started making retching noises at the thought of the smell being from swallowing the deadly miasma.

The rest of his mental chorus shushed the nausea and instead forced his gaze down to steady his pistol on the head of a howling Plague trooper. The howl vanished, as the head did the same in a spray of colorful fluids. There was a brief moment of elation as the other Plague apparently take a few steps backwards following the messy termination of their comrade. He takes the moment to pose with his pistol, giving them a toothy grin as they behold him: *Captain Fang, the spectre of Death itself-*

WHUMP.

Oh. Ohhhhh. The Plague soldiers hadn't been backing away from *him*, a committee of thoughts noted in worried and increasingly shrill voices. They'd been clearing space for the, for lack of a better

term, Plague Dragon to land. For a moment, he gawked at seeing a mythical monster, such as he'd seen in Corporation-approved holobooks as a child. It's obviously some kind of native fauna, and was covered in the slick muscles and impenetrable bony plates instead of penciled-in scales, but the resemblance is still uncanny.

It would make him laugh, had he not been blanching in terror, and he could feel the scream bubbling back up in his throat. This job was *not* what the contract had specified.

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8 Hours Earlier…

"I'm telling ya, they're gonna hear us, shoot us outta da sky, and then where will we be? Space dust! Yer gonna get us all killed for-"

Captain Fang grimaced, and turned to look down at the little indignant stunty. Kilpatrick had one of his foul cigars in his mouth, unlit for now to reduce unnecessary heat signatures, but was chewing the end in his mouth with a vengeance.

Fang gave him a shushing noise, echoed by a few of the nearby Marauders as they huddled next to the viewport. Next to him, Sartak consulted a hastily-scribbled diagram on a dirty noteslate, and murmured "Alright boss, should be riiiight about...now."

On cue, they emerged from the shadow of Klenarus IV's moon, the harsh light of the red star flushing the light in the cabin a bloody crimson. Fang nodded approvingly at his engineer's prediction, when Kilpatrick's harsh screech cut back in.

"Look! *Look!*" he said, gesticulating wildly with a long dirty finger. "Agh, it's *right there*. We're all gonna die, we're all gonna die." Fang wouldn't have been surprised if his whining could be heard across the void between the ships

The captain grunted, and shoved the little stunty aside, cursing inwardly as he saw that despite his numerous annoying flaws, the little gremlin was spot-on. Less than a hundred kilometers off, the Enforcer patrol craft was framed against the dying sun. The red

light glittered off more weapon arrays than he cared to count, but more worrying were the little sets of blue and white lights marking the sensor pod arrays.

He had made sure that the *Stareater's Folly* was running silent, shutting off everything except the bare minimum life support almost as soon as they dropped out of the hyperjump, and short of a few careful atmosphere ventings to bring them in line with their destination, everything else was powered off, or in the case of the ship's fusion core, shielded with as much lead insulation as he had been able to afford back on Maskal.

Please be enough, please be enough, Fang silently chanted, as he thought back to the Maskalian merchant who had, in retrospect, been surprisingly eager to offload so much contraband plating. Plating that, thinking back, had been far lighter than he had suspected lead-carbon stealth weave should have been.

He cursed inwardly at not bothering to look a gift-krork in the mouth, but it was too late for that now, and he had no other choice but to sit and wait it out. In theory, they could have tried doing a hard burn into atmosphere and landed in one of the concealing canyons that peppered the surface according to the old geological survey charts, but as fast as the *Folly* was, an Enforcer gunboat could catch her and burn her to atoms without straining itself.

As if detecting his thoughts, the Enforcer gunboat began to swivel towards their general direction, but the guns remained thankfully silent. A quiet *beep-bedeep* from Sartak's direction made him start. The engineer had a tiny datapad, and was wearing a puzzled expression as he examined something on it.

"Sartak, you damned fool, I told you we're running dark; Why in the star's names are you-"

The engineer cut him off with a finger motioning for him to wait, as he craned his head, listening to something piping in through a wired earpiece. He apparently finished listening, as he lowered the finger and turned to the captain, grinning with self-satisfaction.

"This," he said, tapping the datapad with a chewed-short fingernail,

“Is running on less power than any of our brains are putting out right now, and is effectively invisible. She can’t do much, nor for very long, but I wanted to check to see if there was any radio chatter from their comms to see if we were in the clear.”

His expression soured. “There is a signal, but it’s got a new encryption I haven’t cracked yet. I saved it onto this, so it’ll be ready in a few minutes once I have my main computing core powered up, but that will have to wait until we land.”

He frowned. “I hate not knowin’, Fang. Enforcers are difficult enough as it is without them doing even *more* unexpected secret stuff while we’re trying to work a contract.”

Kilpatrick rolled his eyes and spat. “Oh, right, the Enforcers doin’ unexpected secret stuff has you on edge? Sartak, you *are* aware that that’s essentially all they do?”

The engineer returned the stunty’s insolent glare, and began to clench a fist before Fang strode between the two of them. Looking back to Sartak, Fang nodded his head towards the door. “get on your console and be ready to decrypt that as soon as you have power; I don’t fancy being left in the dark if there’s intel we weren’t informed about.”

As the engineer nods and leaves, Fang rounds on Kilpatrick, who lets out a little *eep* and drops his cigar. “As for *you*, get yer ass down to the hangar and get yer bot ready for orbital drop. You hate being onboard? Fine; You’ll get to secure the LZ,” he said, relishing the look of dismay before the stunty swiped his cigar off the deck grating and strode off grumbling towards the hangar.

Kilpatrick’s stunt-bot was in top condition, but even new off the factory line, they were always poorly equipped for orbital insertion. It was one of the many reasons the Corporation upgraded their forces to use Striders, as they could handle the rough landing with less difficulty. Fang figured it was the least he could do to repay the little whiner for making the last few days hell for the rest of the crew.

A few long minutes passed as they glided through the void, and

then with a bump, the hull began to rumble as the atmosphere of the planet made itself known. Fang sat up from the seat he'd been slouching in, and began barking out orders. "Alright, get those engines hot! I want gunners ready in the turrets; The Council only knows why they would have designated this Deadzone, and the last thing we want to do is get caught with our trousers down if whatever nasties here can fly."

He strode down the central hallway as orx and stunties ran past to their various stations. He stopped as he passed the robotics bay, and leaned his head in. "Sartak, how's that decryption coming?"

The engineer looked up from the Mawbeast harness he was tinkering with, and made a meaningful glance towards the computing console. There, six-inch letter displayed *"DECRYPTION IN PROGRESS: ESTIMATED 15 MINUTES REMAINING."*

Fang snorted in annoyance as well as amusement as Sartak went back to his tinkering, before striding past the bay and towards the cockpit. There, Jurine was wrestling with the controls, cursing and smacking the display in front of her as it beeped indignantly.

"Sah," she said before cursing and smacking the offending dials again, "It's gonna be a bit bumpy comin' in. The core took too damnably long to heat back up, and we've got the engine thrust of a flatulent smokehog for at leas' another two minutes."

Fang couldn't help a nervous look at the rapidly-dwindling altitude numbers, as well as the continent in the viewscreen that was becoming *remarkably* larger with each passing second. Jurine let out a string of swearing ending with "-bedamnable hog-legged piece of space scrap," before flicking a bank of switches to her side and cranking forward the throttle.

The *Folly* responded with a roar, the entire ship shuddering but a lurch under Fang's feet matching the whoop of triumph his pilot let out. "About damned time ya scraploader! Now how's about you impress me for once?" she called out, as she hauled the ship into a loop and dive directly downwards. The inertial compensators helped somewhat, but surprised shouting echoed throughout the ship as she began plunging towards the ground.

“All right, that’s enough!” he yelled, and Jurine pulled the ship out of the dive, still descending at a rapid clip but with Fang’s stomach no longer in his throat. He gave her an annoyed look, which she returned unflinchingly before swooping the ship downwards, saying tersely “Sah, we’re approachin’ the dropzone. Overhead Outpost 7 in three, no, two minutes.”

He nodded, and took the comm headpiece, dialing it to the hangar bay and calling out “Kilpatrick? Kilpatrick, are you ready for drop?”

There was a second or two of silent static, before a weasely voice replied “...Are you absolutely sure you need me to drop? Why not, you know, send the boys and me down in the shuttle instead?”

Fang grinned at the fruitless pleading, and replied “No can do; The shuttle would take longer to warm up than we’ve got, and besides, I know you’ve got this handled.” In front of him, the display for the drop chutes blinked a red *READY* indicator over Kilpatrick’s chute. He chuckled, and behind him he heard Jurine call out “Sah, we’re over tha drop site now.”

“Hey, Kilpatrick, you all strapped in?” There was a noise of confusion, and the stunty replied over the comm “Uh, well, yeah boss, why-*NowaitDON’T*-” With a snicker, Fang poked the *DROP* button over Kilpatrick’s chute, and the comm cut to a sound of whistling wind and combination of stunty screaming and sounds of nausea.

He flicked off the comm array, standing, and said “Jurine, bring us around. I’ll be taking a party to the site.” With that, he stood, and strode towards the hangar, grabbing his favorite pistol from his quarters before meeting with the rest of the landing party on the hangar bay deck.

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“Eh, see boss,” droned Kilpatrick, for the umpeenth time, *“There’s a reason the Corp halfwits make Deadzones, and it sure as snot ain’t so they can install a new Egoburger joint.”* The tinny voice echos out of the stunt-bot’s speaker around the blasted ruins surrounding them.

On one wall, a faded stencil saying ‘Outpost 7’ had been vandalized, and now just showed a stylized black skull.

Captain Fang rolled his eyes at Kilpatrick’s whining, and motioned for the rest of his soldiers to move up into another decimated set of ruins. The little stunt was paranoid, enough to make a human smoking a twitchstick look like a Judwan monk in comparison. He’d gotten over his hard drop, albeit not without more than a little complaining, and before long they were making good time towards the objective locations Fang’s contact had provided.

Kilpatrick’s complaining was scarcely better than when they landed, making a single rude comment about the smell of the planet before clambering back into his stunt-bot and remaining there for the past five hours. The one time they stopped for a rest and a quick meal, he had refused to come out and had insisted that his rations be passed to him through the bot’s hatch instead.

Worse than the little cowardly stunty, though, was Fang’s apprehension about the contract. While he trusted his associate who had connected him with their temporary employer, he had yet to actually meet said employer in person. They had contacted him through voice-garbled drones; Fairly standard practice, except Sartak, for once, had been unable to trace the location and source of the drones, not even able to firmly pin them as having launched on Maskal itself.

Sartak’s news shortly after they landed at the outpost just affirmed his worries. He had called over Fang, his voice low as he passed him an earpiece and murmured quietly “‘Ere boss, uh, you probably want to hear this all private-like first.”

Over the initial hiss of static, he could begin to hear the voices of the Enforcer crew, their tones garbled but still the distinct, clipped and frighteningly efficient speech that matched what he’d seen them do from afar in combat.

“Engines warming back up. 25%, and warp-capable in fifteen minutes.”

“Acknowledged. An additional hour was allotted to arrival time to account for core ramp-up; Proceed at restart within normal parameters

to avoid unneeded damage."

"Acknowledged."

A slight beeping could be heard from a console, an almost pleasant noise if not for the fact that Fang had a sinking feeling in his gut of what it meant.

"Craft detected 75 klicks bearing down 60 degrees, port 30 degrees. Craft identified as Marauder ship, systems powered down and drifting in likely attempt to avoid sensor detection. 65 heat signatures detected onboard."

Despite the recording being nearly a half-hour old by the time he heard it, his heart still raced as a pleasant female robotic voice chimed in with *"Weapon array clusters Six through Ten armed and online. Please designate target."*

The first voice, likely that of the captain cut back in. *"Hold fire. LC-577, what is their projected target?"*

"Sir, from their current drift course, like Outpost 5, 7, or 32. We'll know for sure once they re-engage their core."

"Outpost 7? Send a recon drone to follow their craft; The Council will want a record of this."

"Acknowledged."

Fang looked up glumly as the transmission faded to static, the looming '7' on the wall above him like a spectre of Death rather than a harmless numeral. He indicated to Sartak to keep the transmission private, and had led out his team. If any of them noted his emphasis on higher-than-normal vigilance and readiness while they set out, no-one commented on it.

Another long two hours passed, little seen besides animal movement. Fang had become uneasy when he saw some mutilated corpses of what might have been animals or colonists; With their condition, it was impossible to tell, but they certainly had bled *profusely* over the entire courtyard they were found in.

It was barely a half-hour after that, continuing to follow the tracer-signal their employer had provided, that one of the stunty scouts had noticed her.

"'Ey! 'Ey boss! Boooosssss!" the stunt, Gabrielle, had whined at him as he came running back to the main group. Fang was nearly at the end of his patience, as the scouts had been jumping at animals and shadows all afternoon, but still humored the little goblin as she was babbling about "-some 'uman lady, boss! I think 'er back's all done messed up from how she's stumbling around, but 'ey, maybe we can ask 'er and see if there's a loot cache 'ereabouts."

As soon as he spotted her, though, Fang shoved the little stunty down, ignoring her muffled complaint, and he pulled out his monolensed-scope to take a better look. Unfortunately, what he saw just confirmed his suspicions.

"Gabby," he said, cutting off the under-the-breath stream of epitaths the stunty was muttering to him, "Gabby, I need you to go back and get the others, all of 'em, to come form up on me. Weapons are to be hot and fire on anything that isn't your friendly Captain, unnerstand?"

The stunty merely gulped, gave him a hasty salute, and peeled off in the direction of the main group. He watched her for a moment before returning the scope to his eye. the woman, or at least what was once a human woman, was visibly mutated by the Plague. Spiny ridges emerged from her shoulders and arms, and clothing was shredded where the bony armor plates and grotesque muscles had burst into being.

She was carrying something, clenched tightly in one fist, with a bulky Corporation boarding shotgun in the other hand. As she turned to look around, Fang ducked back down, and his mouth dried as he recognized the face he saw.

How could he not? Doctor Simmonds was a relatively-known face, indicated by the Corporation propaganda and wanted posters as a mere fugitive, albeit one with a very lucrative reward for finding. Capturing her would land them a payday to buy a ship big enough

to dock the *Folly* inside of, but her expression had Fang unnerved and doubtful that such a takedown would actually be that easy.

He glanced back up over the rubble he had sheltered behind as he heard the rest of his troops coming up quietly behind him, but the good doctor was nowhere to be found. Instead, a few flurries of movement, coming their direction fast, had caught his eye, and he just muttered a flat "Oh, crap," as the Plague warms descended upon the warband.

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Now…

Fang was helpless to dodge as he fended off a pair of Plague hounds on either side, but as the Plague dragon (He still had a little part of him insisting this be some kind of demented fever dream) tried to swat him with his tail, Kilpatrick's stunt-bot interjected, catching the blow between two mechanical forearms as the loudspeaker blared *"Hey boss. Pleasant day for a bit of a scrum, eh?"*

Fang just stared, catching his breath for a moment, and Kilpatrick's bot knocked the tail aside, spilling over a group of the more human-looking Plague that were busy trying to set up an emplaced machine gun. As Kilpatrick dove forward, he dodged a pair of blurringly-fast talons, each leaving not even a scratch on his crimson paint.

Fang had to admit; For all of his numerous, cowardly, and annoying flaws, Kilpatrick was probably one of the best stunt-pilots that the Marauders had ever trained. He saw the bot *pirouette*, of all things, before coming up under the dragon's belly and swiping his buzz saw through one wing, and then the other. The beast howled and thrashed, now thoroughly grounded, and Kilpatrick avoided the snapping maw to reach under the jaw,thrusting upwards with the buzzing saw blade.

The blow mangled the beast, and it stumbled backwards, flailing in its death throes. Not willing to take chances, Fang roared over the noise of a grenade "Gark! Mark! Fire on the big 'un! Now!" His two Ripper pilots began pouring fire and missiles onto the dragon, and a

few seconds of deafening blasts later, the monster finally let out a moan and slumped down, shaking the ruins his band had formed up around.

He was about to shout another order when a howl of a Plague, one of the larger ones, alerted him to the monster crouching and about to pounce on him over a traffic barricade.

This is it, he thought, as the battle began to move in slow motion. He couldn't bring his arm up in time, he knew that much instinctively, but he tried nonetheless as the monster arced through the air and landed heavily against him.

But the slicing claws of death never came, and instead Fang could smell a sharp stinging smell of burning flesh. Opening one eye, he let out a yell as he looked right back into the face of the Plague monstrosity, but daylight poked out the other side of a neat laser hole right over the top of the armored brow.

From atop one of the few still-standing parts of Outpost 7, Gabby let out a whoop and danced for a moment with her rifle as Fang gave her a weak thumbs-up and a smile. The top of the roof she was on was also occupied by the bulk of Mark's Ripper suit, and he laid down a fusillade of machine gun fire, ripping apart a few swarms of disgusting Plague-infested vermin, but also coming close enough to his own troopers that a few of them shouted at the Ripper to watch where he was aiming.

A distinct command rang out over the battle, and looking over Fang could see Doctor Simmonds standing atop part of the freshly-slain dragon. She shouted something and pointed, and Fang could see the swarms of infected creatures flow to her directions. They overwhelmed a pair of his troopers on one flank until Gark began cutting them back with a burst of flamethrowing inferno, but even as they stepped back, a Plague abomination larger than even their own Rippers strode forward, walking through the flame like it was merely smoke.

Worse, Fang could see the ground beneath the Plague ripple and shift as well. He thought it was just more of the vermin the Rippers had dealt with earlier, but taking a quick glance through his

monolense, he could see that it was actually tendrils and small tentacles, growing out of the ground like perverse flowers and straining and grasping at movement nearby. He made a gagging noise in his throat, and was about to lower the spyglass when he caught sight of Simmonds.

She looked...different, taller almost. He looked again, and could see that her poise had straightened, from the hunched-over form she and the other Plague had taken to looking, well, proud. She held herself like a commander, and by the way the swarm flowed around her, apparently the howling monsters thought the same. As he watched, she opened her still-clenched hand, revealing a trio of tiny syringes.

Gripping one delicately between two claws, she plunged it into her wrist, and Fang could see her back stiffen. The doctor dropped her shotgun, hunched over again before arching backwards. Her form shifted, the bones of the knee snapping audibly as they reversed direction and with the smaller spines on her shoulder protruding now to form an aura around her head, while her claws lengthened on her hands. He even saw a whipping spined tail for a moment, as she howled a screech of triumph, echoed by the Plague horde a second later.

I guess that answers why the employer wanted her captured. And to the contract, I say sod that; I want to live, and I think there won't be many complaints if we leave promptly.

He shouted a command for retreat, and his troops withdrew to the Outpost structure, Gabby still hooting and hollering as she snapped off more shots at the incoming tide of enemies. The monstrosities had begun to clamber up the fallen corpse of the dragon, using it as a crude ramp to ascend even as his soldier's fire cut them back down.

Fang grabbed a stunlance from a fallen Marauder, Jaren by the looks of what was left of the body. He gave the lance a brief heft, and used it to vault himself up towards the top of the roof Gabby was on. He made it, barely, and as he scrabbled upright he yanked the lance up with him, using it to prod and electrify a Plagued human who tried to follow up after him.

A bass thrum made Fang's heart soar, as he heard the engines of the *Folly* come to rescue them. *Finally, reinforcements. About damn time, too; Today couldn't have gotten any worse.*

The soaring heart was grounded a moment later when the distinctive shape of the Enforcer patrol cruiser they saw earlier broke through the clouds rather than the *Stareater's Folly.* As he saw drop-chutes glow and lance downwards behind them, Fang swallowed, turned, and shouted encouragement and orders to his own soldiers.

Well, can't say I didn't ask for that. Although, if we survive this clusterfrak, there will be one hell of a story to tell at the end.

Keep an eye out for more adventures from Captain Fang and the crew of the Stareater's Folly!

DEADZONE: THE CLEANSING

by Matthew Lindsay

Enforcer Vessel "Gorgon's Fury"
Location: Gamma Tau, High Orbit.
Holding Cell 1A / Prisoner Priority: Ultra, Red / Clearance Level: Absolute

Prisoner 1A Rylor Ings made a pathetic sight. Previously he had been a member of Enforcer First Recon Response. Now he was alone, naked, within a holding cell. Despite being unable to see Rylor assumed these facts, because he knew the only reason he would be alive right now is if the Enforcers had found him. And, if the Enforcers had found him, then this is exactly the circumstances in which he would regain consciousness in.

As a survivor to what had happened – *recollections, unwelcome recollections, flashing, vivid, his last moments of consciousness, threatening to overwhelm* – the Enforcers would want to know what he knew, because the Council of Seven would want to know. They would want to know everything.

Most of all, they would want to know what went wrong.

If, on the other hand, he was dead, and it was a possibility, then the afterlife was a bitch of a place. He could see nothing but blackness, he was in pain, and he was cold. Rylor wasn't a religious man, but this was like no heaven nor hell he'd ever heard of.

Rylor tried to move his arms and felt manacles on his wrists. He realised he was sitting down and could feel cold metal conducting his body heat away beneath him.

No, he wasn't dead; just stripped and blindfolded and chained to a metallic chair. He laughed at the sheer insanity of it all, and his laugh had a desperate edge to it.

Just, he thought again. *Just* stripped*, just* blindfolded*, just* chained.

No, he wasn't dead. The vicious memories were all too presently felt deep within his mind for him to be a dead man yet.

Everything about Rylor was being measured: cerebral activity, cardiovascular physiology, blood pressure, galvanic skin response, facial expressions, tone of voice should he talk, even the chemical balance of his perspiration. He knew the cannulas and intravenous lines that inevitably jutted out of him would connect to a myriad of data-collectors, his body and its functions a passage to his mind and what it held. He could hear the machinery gently humming behind him.

Rylor had participated in Enforcer interrogations before. But he had never been the one to be chained, naked and alone, the one to be reduced to a series of lines and numbers on mechanical apparatus. Furthermore, he was likely being observed right now. Somewhere an Enforcer Interrogator was making sense of everything his body told the data-collectors. His flesh was betraying him: revealing thoughts he would rather not think, exposing emotions he would rather not feel.

Beyond his sense of touch, which was all too present in his ability to feel the shackles and nausea and pain, and hearing the low steady drone of the data-collectors, all other senses were deprived. He heard naught else, he could see nothing, he could taste nothing. Even the air was an indifferent air, a smell not so much defined by what it was, but by what it was not, and it was not anything. It was neither pleasant nor repulsive, but simply and strangely absent.

His senses were useless, worthless, wasted here. Enforcer Interrogation rooms are purposely a sensory void. In fact, they would be almost serene when not in use to forcefully remove information from a still-living being. No expense was spared to make a prisoner feel isolated, solitary, utterly abandoned: sensory deprivation left one alone with nothing but the echoing chambers of one's mind.

Rylor tried his best to hold his nerve. He refused to recall the memories but nor could he totally chase them away. They were simply there, gnawing at the boundaries of consciousness, whispering on the edges of his thoughts, clawing at the edges of his

vision. A memory would appear, gaudy and garish, only to disappear before twisting to reappear, mocking and insidious.

Rylor tried to make sense of it all but it was impossible. He did not know what had happened, or why it had. Now all he wanted to do was forget any of it ever had happened. He wanted to forget this room, this pain, this abyss of madness he was teetering on. Yet the harder he actively tried to forget, the more vivid the visions.

'Tell me what happened.'

The words were measured and quiet yet they struck Rylor like a physical blow. He had not been aware that anyone else was in the room and the words brought his mind back from the precipice of collapse. His training kicked in, the warrior reflex, self-preservation honed to an art – surface thoughts raced to comprehend the situation – had the speaker been present the whole time? – If so, for how long? – When had they entered? – Who would have clearance? He could hear no breathing, sense no movement. Yet the voice had come from so close.

So very, very close.

Blindfolded or not, a First Recon should be able to sense any presence that close, as years of service had trained him better than that. Yet he had not detected anyone, or anything.

The stress of the situation was clouding him. His thoughts were heavy and leaden, his mental reactions sluggish and slow. Had he been drugged? He must have. Of course he had.

Rylor laughed again, but it quickly descended into a short choking weep.

He had no idea how long he had been secured in the cell, no idea how long he had been conscious for, but he had not heard anyone enter nor leave in the time he had been aware, that much he was sure of. He now heard breathing but quickly understood it was not his unknown companion; he would not even be able hear another's breathing above the laboured sound of his own.

‘Tell me what happened, Rylor Ings.’

The voice again, calm but commanding. It came from in front of him, this voice. It was the voice of one who does not expect to be obeyed but demands it. The voice of one who can impart their will into words. A low voice, understated, one used to command. Yet it was abnormally crisp and clear, almost mechanical, human inflection and intonation absent. The speaker must be talking through a vocal-amplifier, the kind installed in an Enforcer helmet so words could not be misunderstood in battle. The kind Rylor himself had worn for so many years.

His unknown companion was an Enforcer, then, and someone of rank to have clearance. That was the logical assumption given the circumstances.

Rylor’s pulse was painfully incessant. Perspiration began to bead and trail down his shaved scalp. Despite the nominal temperature of the room and being secured upon cold metal Rylor was suffering a fever. He could feel his blood rushing as adrenaline kicked in, willing him to fight, willing him to flee, but he was unable to move.

The words spoken may have been calm, but the severity of the situation required no extra force from the one who spoke.

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Captain Caelum Augustus sat against the northern wall facing the prisoner. He had been there since Rylor had been brought in two hours previously, the prisoner forcefully awakened from unconsciousness once the medics had stabilised him.

In that time he had witnessed Rylor Ings experience shock, fear, anger and desperation at the situation; all expected. Augustus did not need the data-collectors to read such obvious expressions. When someone thought they were alone, they hid nothing. And until he had spoken, Rylor had thought he was.

Rylor Ings was First Recon and he would know well that Enforcer interrogations did not often conclude pleasantly. Augustus had witnessed the majority of detainees be carried out by body bag or

stretcher.

Doubtless this was the reason for the manic laugh as Rylor had realised his situation. He would know the Council spared no expense in seeking information and that all human and alien lives were considered expendable if the situation required; a First Recon would have acted on such orders before; and, regarding the Plague, all situations did so. All lives were considered expendable because any living thing that came into direct contact with the Plague was dead already.

Or worse, became part of it, existing only to spread it further.

All except the Marauders, but Augustus was a soldier, not a scientist, and he was not one to waste time considering questions to which there were no answers.

So what to do about Rylor Ings? This man's life was in his hands, but Augustus knew so was his own. As Captain of the Enforcers dispatched to counter the outbreak of the Plague on Gamma Tau, if Augustus failed to comprehend what *had* happened, there was no telling what *could* happen, both to himself and to the planet below. The Plague existed to propagate itself. If such a biological hazard made its way off-world… entire planets, even sectors could be lost. There would be no escaping it.

Before Augustus was chained the sole survivor of the First Recon squad that had somehow, and against all odds, secured the Artefact believed to have infected Patient Zero with the Plague.

And now, only hours later, three of that five-man squad were dead, the fourth MIA.

And the damned Artefact was gone.

The fifth member of the squad was Rylor Ings. This man's mind harboured the visions the Enforcers needed. He had been there when the Artefact was found and when it was lost. He would know what it was. He may know what had happened.

The Council *would not* allow failure, which meant Augustus *could*

not allow failure. The fact was that he needed to know exactly what Rylor knew.

Rylor and the First Recon squad despatched to the planet had found the Artefact then summoned aid. Augustus and the Gorgon's Fury was already mobilised and responded within an hour. Since the First Recon's arrival no vessel could have entered or left orbit: the planet was a Deadzone. No way in or out besides an Enforcer craft. The Gorgon's Fury was currently the only one present and the recon shuttle was still grounded on the planet's surface.

These facts, then, meant the missing Artefact must still remain on Gamma Tau.

So where was it?

The circumstances Augustus and his team had found when they touched down did not make sense. Augustus had many questions, none of which had clear answers. The only answers he could formulate from the evidence found – an evac call, a dead squad and an absent soldier, a missing Artefact and a sole survivor – were not answers at all, for every question they answered, rather than making things clearer, served only to deepen the mystery.

What had happened on Gamma Tau?

By life or death Augustus would extract the knowledge within Rylor but the Captain was loath to waste lives unnecessarily. Enforcer military had already lost four lives over this incident and both the Council and the Corporation would be losing civilians by the score on the planet below. Moreover, Rylor was First Recon; they survived training that killed most, men and women that were hand-picked from Enforcer ranks for the most dangerous assignments. Such skills were valuable.

Was there a possibility of salvaging this man? Perhaps there was still some shred of warrior left within this broken and chained thing. Rylor Ings, having witnessed what he had witnessed, coupled with an expertise of infiltration and combat that bordered on an art form, could be a most valuable asset.

But the foremost priority was discovering what had happened and First Recon were trained extensively to withstand interrogation and torture. If Rylor was harbouring some secret that had left his entire squad dead he would not give it up easily. However, if the prisoner was cooperative, then the Enforcers had just saved a life and potentially countless more.

Augustus had observed enough. He would have to know.

He rose to his full height, his armoured bulk silhouetted by the blinding lights above, giving the appearance of some dark demon emerging from Hell to claim the prisoner's soul.

In some ways, it was not far from the truth.

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Enforcer Vessel "Gorgon's Fury"
Location: Gamma Tau, High Orbit.
Holding Cell 1A / Prisoner Priority: Ultra, Red / Clearance Level: Absolute
9 hours since First Recon's failed extraction.

In the side room of Cell 1A, Enforcer Interrogator Celeste was analysing the reams of data pouring from the machines, looking for any irregularities that would indicate falsehood.

It was a small room, sized for one, with a central semi-circular station to which all information and video feed was sent and recorded. A multitude of wires, cables and connectors emerged to and from it scattered across the walls and floor.

As was the Council's disposition the room was designed for function, not comfort, and its sole function was analysis: analysis of the information gathered by the data-collectors, transmitted and translated to a series of digits, quantified into charts and graphs that measured everything about a person that could be measured. All this information was exhibited on the console's heads-up display, at which sat Celeste.

Celeste was tall for a woman, lithe and athletic, her muscles wiry

from years of fighting. She had seen more than her share of combat, operating without mercy and surviving thus far. The scarlet memories of war had also survived, but they did not burden her. She felt no remorse or doubt but simply acknowledged that her memories were there and a part of her. Just as they were of every soldier. Just as Rylor's would be a part of him.

Sometimes memories of war kept her up at night. Without fear or stress she would lay there, usually alone, replaying the images over in simple recollection. Sometimes they helped her sleep like a child, the sounds of battle almost a lullaby. And sometimes, such as this time, they helped her know when someone was lying.

She had been there, in the crucible of combat. She had done terrible things. Things that had to be done, yes, but terrible nonetheless, and she knew how one felt and reacted when recalling them.

Rylor was hiding something.

To one trained in the detection of deception the body was an open passage to the mind: Celeste was not only trained, she was gifted, a prodigy. Her innate comprehension of the complexities and nuances of physical and emotional responses, no matter how subtle, no matter how minute, meant it was almost impossible to lie to her. She challenged falsehoods and bluffs with unerring accuracy.

She had once played poker with her squad and cleaned house, won everything, a full month's wages for an hour's work. They had never invited her back for another game.

A wry smile emerged as she recalled the memory. Augustus was then as he was now, stern and taciturn, trying to decipher the person before him. She'd been on the receiving end of the Captain across a poker table; she did not envy Rylor Ings in a holding cell. Lucky for him he couldn't yet see. But he would.

She removed her helmet, preferring her own eyes to ones shielded by a lens and placed the helmet atop the console. She combed her hair back from her face, feeling the familiar comfort of her half-shaved scalp. It was a pleasant sensation. Her mind was clearer when it was not confined.

The reflective eyes of her helmet glared downward at her, observing her as she observed the cell.

‘What the hell are you looking at?’ she said to the inanimate object, before turning back to her work.

She continued to analyse Rylor’s statistics and vitals, keeping one sharp eye on the central camera angled direct at the prisoner, the only camera which gave a full body view. She wasn’t particularly interested in the naked anatomy but rather in Rylor’s physiological responses. With her access to the data-collectors she could see everything about a person charted as numbers and graphs, but machines and data could only reveal so much.

It was her perception that was so valued by her employers. Her intuition. It was second to none Augustus had told her once, but she had not needed his acknowledgment. She had known since childhood she could see things others did not. Now, her military training had honed that instinct into something predatory.

Still, she had never forgotten the day the Captain had said that. She had been covered in blood and filth, bleeding out as she fell to one knee, her armor broken and charred. Augustus had offered his hand, standing above her, silhouetted by the sun. But she stood up on her own. He had said those words as she did so, as she stood in the light, bleeding but alive, bodies strewn about her.

She remembered that day fondly. That was the day she became an Enforcer. She had never looked back.

***

‘Tell me what happened.’

Rylor’s head was bowed, perspiration trickling down his scalp as Augustus waited for an answer. He noticed the now-steady rise and fall of the prisoner’s chest; Rylor was performing breathing exercises to calm himself. His head may be downcast in a position of surrender and supplication but he had not yet spoken. And usually a detainee was only all too willing to tell everything in an

attempt to leave alive.

Minutes passed like this, the Captain standing immobile, the chained man breathing slowly, before Rylor eventually spoke. ‘I don’t know what happened.’ The words were uttered so softly they were barely audible above the whirr of the data-collectors.

He repeated himself with steel in his voice, encouraged by his own admission, pronouncing every word with increasing clarity. ‘I do not know.’

Augustus waited a moment and the voice of Celeste whispered in his earpiece as she weighed Rylor’s words: *Truth.*

‘Name – unit – number.’

‘Rylor Ings, 8th First Recon Response, I.D. ST38-05.’

Truth.

‘Why where you on Gamma Tau, Rylor Ings?’

‘We were sent to investigate the damn Deadzone.’ Rylor’s tone was venom.

Truth. Spike in adrenaline. Involuntary combat reflex to a memory. He’s recalling what happened. Press harder. Augustus smiled as he heard her, knowing it was Celeste and no machine that had detected the reflex.

Augustus hand-signalled his acknowledgement, Celeste had never yet led him wrong. He crossed his arms and began anew, ‘What were your orders, Rylor?’

‘One order, priority alpha: reconnaissance. Discover what occurred on planet Gamma Tau.’

Truth.

‘Orders regarding civilian population?’

‘Population irrelevant. Evidence of Plague life forms our only concern. Civilians to be avoided if possible, use of lethal force authorised if necessary.’

Truth.

‘If your only orders were reconnaissance, why attempt retrieval?’

‘I… don’t know. We saw the opportunity. Made the call.’

Truth.

‘Who suggested retrieval Rylor?’

‘I can’t remember.’

False!

‘How did you know where to even look?’

‘I didn’t. Someone else did.’

Truth

‘Who?’

‘I can’t remember.’

False.

‘How many were in your squad?’

A pause. ‘Four’

False. Records show a five man team – but only four profiles present. I’m unable to access one of the records. It’s encrypted. Forcing entry. Captain, it’s been wiped.

‘I ask again. How many were in your squad?’

‘Four!’

He's lying.

Augustus ripped the blindfold from Rylor's eyes and suddenly the light was piercing his retinas as the cannulas did his flesh; he cried out in shock as he went from being blinded by darkness to blinded by light. The Captain, placing a hand on either of Rylor's shoulders, leant over his captive and placed his armored forehead against the prisoners.

'I know you are lying Rylor. Tell me what happened!' His voice was harsh and volatile even through the vocal-amplifier.

Rylor's eyes closed. The he rolled his head back and attempted to bring his forehead down onto Augustus's own, helmet or no. But he telegraphed his attack too early and connected with only air. His assailant had stood back up.

Rylor glared at him and spat. It landed on the Captain's chest plate.

'Screw you. I'm already dead. If I'm not infected, you're going to kill me anyway.'

Well then, whatever is driving him to lie so obviously and fiercely is deeply held, Celeste's amused voice echoed as she analysed Rylor and the data with preternatural speed. *There's an irregularity in the frontal lobe, his aggression is in response to memory recall. He's trying to override it but it got the better of him.*

Augustus signalled one word to Celeste. *Why?* He didn't have to explain that a soldier as highly trained as Rylor wouldn't usually let emotions control his actions.

He's experienced something he doesn't want to remember. Something more than a failed combat deployment. His mind may simply be protecting itself. If it was me in there, I would coerce an answer.

'I know there were more than four, Rylor. And I know you saw something you don't want to remember. But I think you know exactly who suggested retrieval. It wasn't the sergeant who now lies dead in the Deadzone below – his corpse will be ash by now –

because if it was him, you'd say so. Simple order of hierarchy. The fact you say you cannot remember, and you're lying about it, suggests to me it was a trooper and not a leader who made the call. Someone was going above their station.

'I'd wager that the very same soldier who suggested retrieval almost certainly knew where to look for the Artefact. How fortunate, to discover the Artefact in the middle of an outbreak; no-one would question such a stroke of fortune in the middle of an engagement. And so you decided to take it, without the proper precautions.'

Augustus paused, to let his deductions sink in. 'Who was it Rylor? What happened on Gamma Tau? And let me remind you of one thing, soldier ST38-05,' Augustus knelt eye level to the naked Rylor and held his gaze. 'You are not dead yet. But you are not beyond it either.'

Rylor looked up at the Captain, head hanging, breathing laboured, perspiration slowly trailing down his shaved scalp. He was a wretched sight, his flesh battered and bruised, intravenous lines protruding from his arms and back, shackled and hooked up to a mass of mechanical apparatus. But his face looked like it was hacked out of granite, contorted into a grimace of defiance, teeth bared and fury in his eyes. Like a caged animal he strained against his chains as the data-collectors inexorably continued drawing their implied confessions.

Augustus took the challenge. With an unnatural speed only achieved by the capability of his armor he gripped the edges of Rylor's chair and forced it back, smashing it into the wall. The screeching of metal on metal wailed through the room as the data-collectors fell to the side, crashing across the floor.

A cacophony of destruction sang out as the Captain continued his assault, lifting Rylor and the chair and flinging them aside, cannulas and lines ripping out of flesh as crimson blood sprayed across the silver walls. Rylor and the chair tumbled once, twice and came to rest on his right side as he screamed out in pain, gritting his teeth as the Captain stood over him, looking down.

In the next room Celeste's observed all with an indifferent gaze,

waiting for Rylor to break, her eyes rapt and unflinching.

Rylor could taste blood in his mouth, a familiar taste, an unwelcome one. He could feel his body heat fading away, an almost pleasant sensation against the swelling he would inevitably suffer should he live. A pool of liquid was beginning to congeal beneath him, the blood from his torn veins and tissue. The few data-collectors left connected whined incessantly.

'There is an entire population down there, dying, and you know something. Tell me what happened, you selfish bastard.'

Rylor Ings looked up at the source of his fear, hatred rising like bile within him as he accepted his life was forfeit. The levee was breaking and the memories were overwhelming. He could not hold them at bay any longer. What little remained of his physical and mental strength was directed to simply surviving as his body bled. His split lips parted, and from his mouth came forth the tale, as the nightmare relived itself.

Gamma Tau, planet surface, 12.8 hours previous.

Gunfire – Plague – screaming. Sergeant dead. Second squad member dead. The Third, Fourth, and Rylor the fifth and final, are running to the shuttle. Boots pounding through dirt. There's a scream from behind, and a howl, and then a whole chorus of them. More gunfire. The shuttle is ahead. The Fourth gets there first and opens the doors, waving the Third and Rylor through. The Third steps to the console. Reaches for the emergency beacon to call the Enforcers.

A shot rings out. Even with a helmet on the sound is deafening in the enclosed space. Rylor turns, raising his weapon, expecting to see a Stage-Three Plague firing. He doesn't. It's the Fourth. She's unloaded a bullet into the Third's skull from behind. She turns to him. He utters one word – no – before a bullet pierces his shoulder. A second hits the middle of his chest, bursting apart the armor. Rylor's rifle falls from his limp hands.

He drops the bagged Artefact. It makes a dull thud as it hits the floor. The Fourth cocks her head. She is saying something. The

words are distant, and Rylor falls to the ground. He can see the Fourth leave the shuttle, Artefact in tow. Why should she do that?

The Plague in the distance. They're coming. Why would she do that? Its suicide. Don't go out, it's suicide.

Another shuttle comes roaring down. The door opens, the Fourth enters, and it takes off as quickly as it came.

Why would she do that?

The last thing Rylor sees is the white of her hair twisting in the engine's wind as the shuttle door closes behind her. Why would she do that?

She didn't even look back.

Why would she do that?

Why would she do that?

***

'So the Fourth isn't dead?'

Rylor Ings shook his head, clearly distraught.

Truth. Celeste's voice was apathetic to Rylor's anguish.

'She killed the Third, thought she had killed you, and took the Artefact?'

Rylor nodded.

'You should've died, Rylor. The injuries you sustained were lethal.'

'Then why am I here?' He choked.

'Look down.'

Rylor looked at his chest and saw a large fresh scar, pockmarked

flesh right over where his heart should be. A kill shot. If the head was unavailable, it's where he would aim. The skin was bruised and purple, as was his shoulder. It was still knitting itself back together, but he couldn't feel it. Likely a localised numbing agent. He hadn't even recalled his injuries until forced to do so. It was all he could do to utter the question – 'How?'

'Your heart is on the wrong side. Though in this instance I would venture you consider it the "right" side. The bullet missed it. But your lung was deflated, caught by shrapnel. You were found suffering from hypovolemic shock due to blood loss – more than a third, in fact. Chances of survival were minimal. But you didn't die. Can you remember what happened next?'

Rylor shakes his head again. There is liquid on his face. Augustus is unsure if it is perspiration or tears. It's hard to tell when someone is lying beaten on the floor, gravity mixes the two.

'You crawl, dying, over the body of the Third to hit the beacon and seal yourself in. I've seen the footage from the shuttle myself. Then, falling to the floor, you throw your trauma kit apart and cover your wounds in clotting-agent. That's the last thing you do before you collapse unconscious. And that's how you're found an hour later: in a pool of your own blood, sickly pale, barely breathing. The medical aid within your armor did what it could, but without the clotting-agent, it wouldn't have been enough. It didn't take us long to get there but long enough that you should've died from your wounds several times over. But you didn't.'

Augustus let the weight of his words descend, watching Rylor devour each and every one, his eyes hardening as the pain of recollection gave way to anger and betrayal.

'So we bring you aboard, patch you up. Pump several pints of blood into you. Thank the Council for donors. It is frankly amazing what can be done in the face of necessity. Life-threatening injures healed in a matter of hours. Two hours ago you forcefully awakened and placed in this cell. And so… here we are.'

'Am I infected?' Rylor rasps. Augustus noticed his nose has broken in the fall.

He's scared. He's seen what the Plague does to flesh.

'No. You are not infected. We would not have brought you aboard if you were. Now Rylor, I assure you, there is only one way out of this room for you and that is to answer my questions. Listen carefully. I will not ask them a second time.'

Augustus stopped. Even as Rylor lay bleeding, their gazes were locked. Would the prisoner respond to intimidation or persuasion? Coercion had got them thus far but Rylor had continually shown defiance; he was not weak, violence had little to no effect upon him and much further would kill him. Augustus signalled to Celeste. *Thoughts?*

His admission came after you spoke of civilian casualties. He has a conscience.

Persuasion, then; appeal to self-worth.

'Who was the Fourth Rylor? Why did she take the Artefact, and whom did she leave with? That planet is a Deadzone. No way in. No way out. The only people powerful enough or stupid enough to pull a move like that is the Rebels or the Corporation, and there are no ship signatures of either within this galaxy in the last twenty-four hours.'

'I don't know why she took it, and damned if I know whoever the hell she left with.' Rylor spat the words out. His anger was not directed at Augustus.

'Describe the shuttle to me.'

'It was military. I've never seen a civilian ship like it – black, black all over, black windows.' He twisted his head from side to side in torment, as if to shake the memory free. 'There was nothing on it! It was black! And it was bare! Nothing else! – Wait.'

'Now you realise,' Augustus interrupts. 'That in itself is something Rylor. A military shuttle with no insignia? Special Forces, likely private, one wealthy enough to leave no shuttle signature and one

that did not want to be recognised. And the pilot knew exactly where to land. There is no footage of that ship, Rylor. That is why we need your eyes. Gamma Tau is a fledging world, with little surveillance, and while there are cameras present the footage that we have recovered is wiped. The whole capital's surveillance is blank. To recover any backups we will need access to the central servers, which means until then we are fighting blind. The only evidence that the Artefact was even found is your shuttle camera. That is, quite literally, all the evidence we have to go on. Well that, and you. Now do you see why we require your assistance? You are an Enforcer. Remember who you are. Think harder, delve deeper. Was there anything else?

'That's it. That's everything.'

Truth. But there's more. He is not lying, but hiding something, still. Ask who the fourth was.

'Who was the Fourth? A city's surveillance wiped, records expunged – do you know what level of access that takes?'

'I don't know!' Rylor shouted. He was sick of this. Sick of everything.

'It takes my level of access, Rylor. Captain or higher. Absolute clearance to Enforcer military personnel records and recordings. Either the Rebels have made some very, very high profile bribes, or it leaves one other option: Corporation. Rogue assets. I need to know who, and how, and why. And I will know.'

'I've told you everything.'

'I believe you. But my Interrogator does not and she is rarely wrong. This means there's something in your mind you do not want to share or recall. Would you recognise the Fourth?'

'Yes.' Rylor's face and tone became emotionless.

Truth. Certain. Significant increase activity in memory recall. They shared many memories together. She... means something to him.

‘Who was she?’

‘Well, as you will no doubt find out, she is the mother of my damn child.’

Oh now we’re talking, Celeste whispers. *Love. The most powerful of emotions. And the singular greatest weakness of a sentient species.* She exhales, loud enough for Augustus to hear. *Culminating with attempted execution, left to die at the hands of the Plague. That is a cold, cold, thing to do.* Her voice is in awe.

‘What do you make of this?’ August said, flicking off his vocal-amplifier so Rylor would not hear.

I admire the sheer balls it takes to do such a thing. No emotional attachment. Just devotion to the objective. And I believe him.

‘You are a ruthless bitch, Celeste.’

Acknowledged.

Turning the vocal-amplifier back on Augustus crossed his arms and faced down toward Rylor. The man had been watching everything, saying nothing. The bleeding had stopped and the blood on the floor was beginning to congeal.

‘We are going to find her Rylor. We’re going after the Fourth. She may be the mother of your child but she left you to die on a Deadzone. She meant to kill you, in the worst way possible; whatever you once had, you don’t, whatever you thought she was, she wasn’t, and will not be again. You should’ve died Rylor. I respect that you didn’t. Now, the way I see it, you have two options before you. Recover yourself, remember who you are and the Council for whom you work, and help me find that Artefact. Help me find the Fourth. You will tell me everything, about the Artefact, about her. And then, when we find her, I will not expect you to hesitate in putting her down.

‘Or second. You can lie here, dwell on your misery and broken memories, and when you no longer prove useful to interrogation you will be executed for treason and your body burnt. Your records

will be expunged and you will have ceased to ever exist. Your child will be orphaned and given to the Council to be raised in military service in repayment for your disloyalty.

‘You should’ve died Rylor, but you didn’t. A strong survival instinct is a strong will. One who survives when he absolutely should not? I could use a man like that. The Council could use a man like that. You were, and could be again, First Recon. And your bloodline would continue to enjoy the gratitude of the Council for your service.

‘The bullets have done more damage to your mind than your body. We can repair the latter, but only you can salvage the former. Will you let what happened break you? After all you have done to survive? Or will you remember who and what you are, and help me find the one who betrayed you and put a bullet through your chest?’

Rylor looked up the Captain. His breathing was laboured. His eyes were distant, seeing beyond the walls of the room. They eventually focus. His mouth was twisted into a grimace and his teeth were gritted. A moment passed. Then he slowly nodded and saw his reflection in the visor of Augustus’ helmet do the same. He attempted to straighten himself, and did the best one could expect given the circumstances.

His vitals are stabilising Captain. I’ve pulled the records on his child for your inspection.

Augustus stood up and nodded once, ‘We have work to do, Rylor Ings. I will expect you to be ready. We are going to cleanse that planet.’

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Enforcer Vessel “Gorgon’s Fury”
Location: Gamma Tau, Low Orbit.
Infantry Recreational Room, 04:34 hours Earth equivalent.
14 days since First Recon’s failed extraction / 2 hours 26 minutes until planetfall.

A shot rings out. Rylor turns, raising his weapon, expecting to see a Plague Stage Three firing.
He doesn't.

It's the Fourth.

She's unloaded a bullet into the Third's skull from behind.

She turns to him.

Darkness.

***

Rylor Ings had risen early this morning of the ships artificial day-night cycle, the lights of the infantry quarters still dimmed in imitation of early dawn. For the first time he opened the case housing the footage of his near execution. He ran his fingers over the data unit. No markings, no title. Nothing. It had sat on top the solitary shelving unit in his assigned room since its delivery, untouched, unmolested. He hadn't known what he was waiting for. He had intended to watch it immediately, but found himself unable to do so. He hadn't even been able to bring himself to open it. So he shelved it.

Rylor had been in Limbo, a man caught in that void of existence when the past is torn away and one does not know where they come from nor where they are going; but they merely exist, exist, exist solely to keep breathing. The past was a lie and the future even more so.

Then, midday yesterday, the call had finally come. Briefing and preparation was at 06:00 hours earth equivalent. 07:00 hours they were to descend to Gamma Tau. The cleansing and search for the Artefact was to begin, three seven-man squads were to be sent. Rylor would be a part of Alpha team, led by Augustus himself.

Once the call had come through Rylor knew what he had been waiting for. So he awoke early, took his final recovery medication, and picked up the data unit.

Two weeks gone. Two weeks since his release he had fought and trained and sweated and bled so he would not have to think. But he had to know what he was descending back into. He had to see what had happened, recall it all – every heart achingly painful instant – because that was the only way he could ever face her again.

The Fourth. Today was the day he began his search for the mother of his child. The person who had tried to kill him.

***

A shot rings out. Rewind. A shot rings out.

Why would she do that?

Rewind. A shot rings out. Again. And again. And again.

Rylor paused the recording and sat a while without moving. Then he gently placed the vid control on the table, seeing if he could do so without making a sound. He did so, and felt pleased. It was in such things he found his solace. In any undertaking that could momentarily distract him from what had happened, no matter how small. In all his duties he was meticulous, in all tasks he threw himself with all effort he could muster.

Each day Rylor had pushed himself to the utmost limitations of his physicality. His waking hours had become routine: exercise, eating, training, mock combat, exercise, eating, weapon study, sleep. The routine was his own making; since his release he had been entirely left to his own devices. He saw other Enforcers but he may as well have been a ghost. He knew no names, only faces. He had not spoken to them or them to him. Rylor would see the Enforcers preparing for the descent to Gamma Tau, being briefed together, training together, eating together. But not Rylor. The only sign he had not been forgotten was a single bunk room in Enforcer quarters and three meals a day delivered there.

The first day of his release he had received no instructions as to what he should do or where he should present himself. He stopped outside the briefing room, stumbling across it as he explored the ship, seeing Captain Caelum Augustus inside giving some sort of

lecture to the Enforcers present. Augustus was the only one whom Rylor knew by name, recognising him by bulk and by rank. But the Captain stopped talking the moment Rylor entered and the room fell silent. All eyes turned on him. Rylor said nothing and left; he did not attempt to integrate himself again. Augustus simply watched him leave.

Later, he had found Augustus in the Officers' Quarters. He asked him for a copy of the shuttle footage recovered from Gamma Tau. Augustus nodded but said nothing about what had happened earlier in the briefing room. The next morning, a copy of the footage was waiting outside Rylor's room. Again, there were no instructions as to what Rylor should do that day.

So, appearing to have free reign of his time for the first time since he had joined the Enforcers in his long forgotten youth, Rylor did the only thing he knew: he trained and prepared.

What exactly he was training for he could not say.

It was not for the descent back into Gamma Tau; Rylor was a soldier, and moreover he was First Recon. He had been prepared for combat the moment he could again lift a rifle. But this newly adopted regime was something more. It was to the point of obsession, a maniac striving for the unreachable. His wounds were healed but he ravaged his body, beyond nausea, beyond pain, and each night he collapsed into his bunk and black oblivion. His sleep was dark and dreamless, silent as the grave he would one day inhabit.

Perhaps, he thought while lying there one morning, that is what he was preparing for.

Rylor had sometimes seen the Captain, a large sweeping shadow of a figure, in the peripheries of his vision. He presumed Augustus was observing his methods, seeing how he would respond to his freedom. To what had happened.

Augustus had told him to be ready and so he would be. Day by day Rylor numbed himself further, unthinking, unfeeling. He healed and fought, then healed and fought again. He tore open day-old wounds

only for them to heal and re-open the next day. He bled. He ached. Two weeks he trained aboard the Gorgon's Fury but it felt like a lifetime. He had difficulty in recalling anything that had happened before his awakening in that holding cell. He knew he had a child, that somewhere out there in the vast blackness of space was a piece of himself, a life he had fathered. He also knew that child had a mother, whom he had once loved.

Once loved?

Still loved?

Rylor felt the most focussed he had ever felt, his awareness heightened beyond even that of First Recon training. Something within was driving him onward, pushing him to attain feats of physicality and combat prowess he had never before known.

He had once known a life before this waking dream of sweat and adrenaline and blood, but the memories were vague, wisplike, ethereal. He once attempted to grasp them, to recall who he was and had been, after days of silence the loneliness of his situation becoming too much to bear. He found himself withdrawing from the touch of enlightenment the moment it had threatened to be caught. He was not yet ready to descend those depths that had once filled him with joy. They had been destroyed, ruined as surely as his body had been and there was no way to make them whole. And so he endured his existence as one endured a cancer.

His body may have been ready, his skills as an Enforcer even more so, but not yet his mind. Not yet that. Yet the brain was a muscle, and like all muscles, could be trained and controlled. Rylor held onto that logic the way a drowning man held onto a piece of flotsam, drifting alone in a sunless black sea.

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Rylor shook the thoughts of the last fortnight away and any creeping despair with them. All that mattered was the now; him, here in this moment. Still alive. Still breathing. Surviving.

And this was real. This was happening. In a few hours he would be

treading the planet's surface, looking for her. For all his self-medicated physical punishment and numbness he still felt keenly the wounds he had suffered. Perhaps more so. The further he ran from what had happened the wider the abyss yawned behind him. He fought the invisible war within, beneath the flesh; his skin was healed but the damage was done.
And all along, all he really knew was he had to find her.

He glanced back at the vid screen. It had paused it at the moment he fell to the floor. The Fourth was there, frozen in time, as she turned her back on him. Blood hadn't yet begun to form around him. But it would. It already had in his mind.

He realised he still couldn't say her name. He couldn't label her. To give her a name made her real. Made them, real. And he couldn't do that. Not if he was to do what he had to do once they found… her.

Rylor look down and saw his fists were clenched. His knuckles had turned white. His jaw ached from gritting his teeth.

He released the tension slowly.

Inhaling deep, Rylor leant forward, picked up the vid control, and again pressed play. The scene repeated itself just as he knew it would, just as it had every time. The footage ended. Rylor pressed play and watched it anew. The room was silent, the only noise that of the vid. It made the gunshots all the more harrowing.

The door to the rec-room opened and a lone female Enforcer walked in with a half shaven scalp of dirty blonde hair swept over to the right; a winding tattooed vine of black and grey roses descended from the shaved side of her head around her neck and down to wherever else it may lead. From the neck down she was covered in black under-armor fatigues. He recognised most of the Enforcers stationed in the barracks, but he did not recognise her.

There shouldn't have been anyone awake at this hour, let alone in the rec-room ready to don armor – and that included Rylor – but the stranger didn't pause as she entered. She looked at Rylor as if

she had expected him to be there but held his gaze for a second too long than was comfortable. Rylor felt naked beneath that gaze.

She made her way across the room to food storage. Rylor turned away from his silent companion and back to the vid screen, pressing play, used to being the silent anomaly among the other Enforcers.

Rylor watched the footage again. He restarted it once finished.

‘It’s not going to change, you know,’ a female voice called from the side of the room. The voice itself was a contradiction, endearing with an edge to it. Perhaps that’s just because it’s the first voice that had been directed at him for a fortnight, thought Rylor. Maybe he’d forgotten what it was like to be spoken to. He took a moment to consider his reply.

‘I’m not expecting it to.’ He did not turn from the vid screen.

‘Not exactly the kind of reply that required much thought, Rylor Ings. Why did you hesitate?’

He turned to face his companion, an unwilling participant to conversation. The Enforcer was leaning against a counter eating something out a bowl, looking up at him as she did so. Now that Rylor saw her, he noticed her heart-shaped face was of indeterminable age. ‘Perhaps I was wondering if you were actually talking to me. Until now, none bar Captain Augustus have, and even he only once.’

She lounged, but the way she held herself was akin to a coiled cobra. Rylor did not believe she was casual as she appeared. She was a predator posing as prey.

‘Hmm,’ she said between mouthfuls. ‘Have you seen me before?’

‘No. Not that I know of.’

‘You are correct. We’ve not met, not formally at least. You wouldn’t recognise me, because you do not know me. So do not presume to know me. My point is I was clearly talking to you. So I’ll ask again, why did you hesitate?’ She resumed eating.

‘You caught me off guard.’ Rylor made to turn back to the screen. The female wouldn’t let him.

‘Bullshit. A First Recon caught off guard? No. Why did you hesitate?’

‘I guess I didn’t know what to say.’

‘You’re lying. And you’re bad at it.’ She put the bowl down, empty.

‘Who are you? Why so interested?’

‘I am Celeste, you are Rylor. Why did you hesitate?’

‘Honestly? Because I was weighing you up,’ Rylor did not disguise his irritation. For two weeks he had lived in silence for this, a verbal interrogation in the small hours, today of all days? Screw her.

‘Explain.’

‘Who would come into a room at this hour – dressed and ready all but for weapons and armor – and eat apart from the others? I see no rank. I know the way you hold yourself you’re used to fighting, not just from Enforcer training but something more. It’s a part of you. I’d even guess you like it, you’ve got a wry smile on even now as we talk – you like the challenge. Shaved head, but still a good length of hair, enough to grab. So you’re used to fighting with a helmet on because without a helmet that hair’s a weakness. You should shave it all.

‘And then suddenly you speak. Forthright tone, condescending. So I weigh the options, and think “who would be the first person to speak to me for two weeks, knowing all that I know?” I got no answer. So I considered my reply.’

She cocked her head. ‘And you gave a guarded one.’

‘I’m not about to bare my soul.’

‘Oh you needn’t be shy with me, Rylor. I’ve already seen your soul. I was your Interrogator.’

Rylor’s reaction was to say something immediately but he thought better of it. She’d gotten under his skin. A second later he realised he hadn’t known what to say anyway. So he said nothing. Celeste raised an eyebrow.

‘Considering your reply again? I presume from the length of this silence I can expect something profound?’

Rylor gave no reply. Celeste shrugged. ‘So be it, foreplay over.’ Her demeanour changed – the cobra uncoiling itself – and she stood up straight, crossing her arms.

‘Two things, Rylor. First, we’re descending into Gamma Tau in three hours. We are both a part of Alpha team. I want to know where your head is at. And second, as for the wry smile you mentioned?’ Celeste turned her head to face him directly. ‘I have an asymmetrical jaw, my mouth’s angled up on the right. Few years back I took a grenade face-on. Of course they could fix it, make me pretty again, but I kinda like it. Reminds me I survived.’ A sardonic smile emphasised her point; it did favor the right of her face, but her eyes were hard.

Celeste waited for Rylor’s reply. Neither moved; both were statuesque.

‘Really, Rylor? Really? You’re going to sit there and stare and say nothing?’

‘Okay. My turn. Two things for you: first, I’d apologise, but you don’t need it. Second, I do not enjoy my skills being questioned. I’m First Recon.’

‘You arrogant bastard, I’m not questioning your skills. I’ve seen how you’ve trained aboard this ship. As I said: I want to know where your head is at. I want to know if we find the Fourth, what you intend to do about it. We both know what she was to you.’ Celeste was in interrogation mode now, observing every response, almost begging Rylor to lie to her. She would know. She always did.

He shrugged. Was he mocking her? ‘I’ll do whatever is needed.’ He meant that, at least. There was no hesitation or doubt.

‘You prepared to put a bullet into her? Or a knife?’

‘Whatever is needed.’ His tone of voice was flat.

‘Think you could do that? Get up close and personal, look her in the eyes you once so loved looking into, as you ended it, permanently?’ Celeste took a step toward Rylor, standing above him. ‘Think you could be as cold as her?’

He was silent a moment. ‘I’ve given you my answer, Interrogator. What else do you wish to know?’ Rylor rose, matching her stance. He hadn’t realised it sitting down but while she was tall, she wasn’t as tall as she appeared. Rather, she carried herself well, giving the impression of height.

‘How have you been sleeping?’

‘Dark and dreamless and black as space itself.’

‘No trouble at all? You’ve not been exhausting yourself because you fear your dreams?’

‘Even if I did, which I don’t, the very fact I was doing something about it would compensate.’

‘Perhaps. But perhaps not. A rested body doesn’t compensate a rested mind. A lapse here, a hesitation there, someone winds up dead. Fouled up beyond all recognition in an instant. Look at what happened to your squad. For all their training, no one seen that coming did they?’

‘Well what about you, Celeste?’ It was the first time he had used her name. ‘So eager to speak ill of the dead. You ever have any trouble sleeping? You’ve killed people. You ever worry you’ve done something wrong that you can’t put right? Or that you might have to? What if your life was a lie?’

‘I’ve never had trouble sleeping. I’ve killed men, women and children, and never had trouble sleeping.’

Rylor swallowed his reply. He had heard Enforcers talk like that before. He’d heard himself talk like that before, in extended conflicts where you feel you can’t breathe for the suffocation of war. It is not a sane path to walk down.

‘I’m not sure what to say to that.’

‘There isn’t a lot to say,’ Celeste replied. She left the room.

Rylor watched her go.

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Enforcer Vessel “Gorgon’s Fury”
Location: Gamma Tau, Low Orbit.
Captains Personal Quarters, 05:01 hours Earth equivalent.
14 days since First Recon’s failed extraction / 1 hour 59 minutes until planetfall.

‘How bad is it?’ The question was a blunt and honest one.

‘Bad, Commander. The whole sector is dark. Fly-by sweeps estimate civilian casualties within the capital at seventy percent, with survivors scattered or hiding. More are dying on the fringes. There is some armed resistance against the outbreak but without support, it will not last.’ Augustus replied as he was spoken to, for he had known the Commander for many years. There was no need for formalities between them.

‘And the Plague?’

‘An epidemic threatening to become a pandemic. Contagion has slowed but spreads inevitably on all fronts. With communications down due to the Containment Protocol the frontier municipalities do not have warning. They know something is wrong, of course, but they do not know what until it hits them. By that time it is too late.’

The Commander’s weathered face was furrowed on the vid-screen.

He was a regal man, a career soldier accustomed to the hardships and tragedies of war, but the Plague was threat enough to worry even the most experienced of soldiers. And it showed. Commander Quentin Valetta trusted Augustus and did not hide his concern. There was silence.

It was for this exact reason the Containment Protocol – the Deadzone – was born, Augustus thought, unfamiliar with seeing his friend so worn. Some things were simply too dangerous to allow any chance of procreation, so hazardous that even an entire population was considered expendable.

Twenty thousand lives. That was the population of Gamma Tau. Twenty thousand lives, all expendable. It did not matter who they were. It did not matter they had families, hopes, dreams, loved ones. In such times of crisis all matters of the heart faded and all that remained was the mathematics of war. Twenty thousand lives sacrificed here; potentially millions saved beyond.

Valetta broke the silence. 'What is your plan Augustus?'

'Quite frankly we do not know what to expect,' said the Captain. 'Gamma Tau's capital Gamma Prime – where patient zero was reported – had an estimated population of five thousand. Even if only one-tenth of the causalities were infected, and that is a conservative estimate Commander, we are facing potential enemy numbers upwards of three hundred and fifty and still growing. Coupled with the lack of on-the-ground surveillance and, well, it has made an already difficult task much, much harder.

'We have spent the last two weeks completing low atmosphere recon.' Augustus pulled up a three-dimensional blueprint alongside Valetta on the vid-screen for them both to see.

'We have mapped the city and surrounding locales and recorded Plague activity and civilian resistance, highlighted here in red. I intend to lead three seven-man teams in search and retrieval,' Augustus gestured and the blueprints centred on one large building in the north-east of the city. 'Our first target is Gamma Tau's Corporation headquarters. As per regulations all Corporation servers must house backups of surveillance, so despite the blank

footage we recovered from our initial data mine, once the backups are salvaged we will be able to map the flight path of the unknown shuttle. Once we have done so we will pursue and recover the Artefact.

'Now the initial outbreak has spread, sectors of the city are partially empty, and we will attempt to avoid those that are not. A low orbit shuttle will be our eye in the sky, advising us on hostile movements. As previous encounters have shown, the Plague is not a cohesive force. It is a gibbering mass that, while ferocious, seeks only to spread. The resistance fought by the planets remaining populace has drawn many of the infected, and hopefully, our way will be clear.' Even as he spoke the words Augustus hated them, hated how much depended on unknowns.

'You are emulating the First Recon approach, without a First Recon squad.'

Valetta did not sound convinced as he leant back and considered the Captain's words.

'Why would you not engage the Plague on an open battlefield? Deploy to a defensive position on the edge of the city and hold it; let them come to you. You have an entire ship of Enforcers. Use them. Why would you not play to your strengths Augustus?'

'With respect Commander, and both as a soldier and a friend I am loathe to say this, but I know you have not fought the Plague before. I have.'

There was another dead silence between them before Augustus continued. 'This is not a rudimentary intelligence we are fighting. It may not be a cohesive force but it is insidious, and it is cunning, and it is capable of adapting. I will not lie, Commander, I do not believe this is a battle we can win without superior firepower. And we do not have it. By the time we do, Gamma Tau will be beyond recovery and the Artefact will be lost–'

'And what do you know of this Artefact?' interrupted Valetta.

'That it is two entwining silver oblong cylinders that culminate in a

point. The soldier who secured it likened it to a strand of DNA, though he also said that was a poor comparison but the best he could do. The surface, while hard to the touch, looked fluid from a distance, as if it was coated in a liquid. He also said it was smaller than he expected, half a metre at most.'

'I believe such Artefacts are each unique. I presume it was confirmed by the energy signature?'

'Squad scanners went haywire: nonsensical readings and interference with communications. It is the reason why the squad fled back to the shuttle to summon aid, as they found it impossible to make any contact using their personal comms.'

'And the shuttle communications worked?'

'They did not have a chance to attempt them before the Artefact was taken.'

'So once the Artefact is secured you are effectively both silent and mute until you return to your ship? And even then we are unsure if communications will function.'

'Yes. And that is all we have to go on.'

'So many ambiguities Augustus, so many,' Valetta sighed. 'And it is ambiguities that get Enforcers killed. Continue what you were saying previously. Why would you not engage the Plague as per standard protocol?'

'As I saying Commander, in short, if we engage the enemy in open battle it will find a way to surround us and it will use its numerical superiority to overwhelm. These creatures do not fear death; they will attack en masse. I have seen it. A defensive fortification buys us naught but time, time this world does not have. If we are to understand the why of what happened, we must move soon, before we leave the planet to its fate. We have but one advantage; the enemy hold all the cards. We are fighting blind. As such, I believe speed and subtlety is in order.'

'The advantage is?' asked Valetta.

‘Rylor Ings. He was a member of the First Recon squad that secured the Artefact. He also knows intimately the Enforcer who took the Artefact. As that is all we have to go on, I believe his experience with our target may prove valuable in determining her motives and movements. She attempted to execute him for a reason.’

‘Ah yes, I read your report. Allow me to refresh myself,’ the Commander opened a document in front of him. ‘Rylor Ings. An exceptional record and now even more so, being a sole survivor. One child. His partner was a member of the same squad. Highly unorthodox.’

‘It seems their marriage was kept secret,’ said Augustus. ‘Her pregnancy was accelerated and their child removed to be raised by family on their home world. Unlike her military record, her medical documents, thankfully, were not wiped and encrypted. Because of this occurrence I have also suggested security changes to Enforcer personnel records.’

‘I have forwarded them.’ Valetta continued thumbing through the document. He paused. ‘Rylor’s partner was the one who shot him.’

‘Yes. Her name was Annika Sanne. All who knew her speak highly of her.’

Another silence. The Commander’s eyes flitted back and forth as he continued reading. ‘I do not like this Augustus. In all our years together I do not think I have ever said this, but something is very, very wrong here. All investigations into Annika Sanne’s past have come to naught. Her superiors have been questioned numerous times and all claim ignorance, each and every one passed by Enforcer Interrogators – yet absolute clearance was required to blackout Gamma Tau’s surveillance and her records. What was on her records that they hid? We are fighting blind indeed.’ He snorted. ‘What does Rylor say of her now?’

‘We have not discussed it.’

‘Why not, Captain?’ Valetta’s tone was dangerous and his eyes flashed sharply as he looked up from the report.

No soldier liked surprises, especially not commanders.

Augustus breathed deep and looked at his friend directly, his expression solemn. Much of the time he and the Commander thought the same. Augustus hated to disagree with him despite their shared history, and even more so because of it.

‘I do not believe he would have anything of value to add. If he had known of her intentions I believe he would either have died before the failed operation or attempted to stop her. He was shot with his back turned by the person he had a child with. His world has been shattered. I have watched him closely in the time he has been aboard this ship: all that remains to him is his military service. It would be an injustice to interrogate him further when I feel to do so would not further our knowledge, and furthermore, would deny the Enforcers an outstanding soldier.’

‘Will he do what is needed when the time comes?’ Valetta’s expression was unreadable.

‘Yes, I believe he will.’

‘As you say Caelum, as you say.’ Valetta sighed again. The Commander was one of the few people who used his first name, and he only did so when he was speaking intimately, off the record, a friend speaking. From his surroundings, it looked like Valetta was in the command centre on his own ship, yet the room was empty. It must be early hours there, thought Augustus. That would be why his friend looked so tired. There were dark rings under the Commanders eyes and his hair was a lighter mix of greys than Augustus had last seen. Either the years warring in space were beginning to take their toll on the Commander, or age was finally catching up to him.

He was looking into his future, Augustus realised. It was not an entirely unpleasant sight. He too, was a career soldier.

‘What do you make of Annika’s actions?’

‘Were it not for the second shuttle and Rylor’s testimony I would

suggest she went insane. It happens. Captivated by the Artefact, seduced by it, a longing to protect it, worship it, whatever such madness. These unknown Artefacts are incredibly dangerous. None yet understand the why or what of their origin, let alone how they begin outbreaks of the Plague. Those who have spent any prolonged time in contact with them report sounds of whispers and feelings of intense nausea. There have been numerous suicides related to them, but for safety and morale, we suppress such information.

'But Annika's actions were coolly executed. The surveillance blackout, the second shuttle, and though I have only circumstantial proof I would suggest even the finding of the Artefact: it is all orchestrated.'

'Clearly so. God dammit, I do not like this. Not one bit. Give me a decent battle and a long war any day. This cloak and dagger is distasteful to me. You think the same as I, I see,' Valetta said, reading the end of Augustus' report and closing it. 'Politics.' The Commander spat the word.

'I fear politics is what it is, Commander. No Rebel or alien signatures were detected near Gamma Tau between the time patient zero was infected and we arrived. For such strings to be pulled as would be needed to wipe personal records and remove surveillance in that time frame, we are discussing political machinations with a shadow military behind them. Whoever Annika is working for wields significant power.'

'Rylor Ings, the survivor, he confirmed as such didn't he? A black military shuttle without markings or insignia. I already know the answer Augustus but I have to ask: he has been thoroughly interrogated, correct?' Valetta was speaking formally again.

'By myself and Celeste, my second.'

'You trust her?'

'Implicitly.'

'From what I have heard Celeste is a dangerous woman, Captain. Dangerous for your career. You would already have been promoted

further had you not defended her in military court. She offends the wrong people.'

'She is a good soldier. An excellent Interrogator'

'She is a good killer. A good soldier follows orders. She, however, breaks them if she feels the need,' Valetta looked to Augustus as if to say something further, then thought better of it. 'Nonetheless, you have proven yourself time and again, and the Council have seen fit to finally promote you, despite the company you keep. Survive this, Augustus, and you will find yourself also being addressed as Commander.'

Augustus nodded. Valetta looked at him earnestly.

'I have always had faith in you Caelum, and both myself the Council have been rewarded every time I have placed my trust in you. This is no different. I hope that we will speak again, and, if we do, of better things.'

Valetta closed the vid feed. Augustus reclined in his chair and looked around his quarters, the history of his military career displayed proudly on the walls: framed reports, commendations, pictures of those he had served and served with. He looked about these and considered all that he and his friend had spoken of.

The only way this ended was in death.

The question was how many would die along the way. What of Rylor? What of Celeste? What of the Enforcers stationed on the ship that he considered his family? How many of these would not return from Gamma Tau? How many would become another name on the Wall of Remembrance?

None are forgotten, all are honoured. Augustus truly believed that. He had to.

He turned the vid screen back on and pulled up Annika's medical documents. They were the only proof they had of her existence, saved only by a simple misspelling of her name of all things. An 'n' missing. Fortuitous fate, human error at its best. Someone, years

ago in the hospital she had given birth at, had spelt her name wrong, and because of that whosoever had wiped and encrypted her records had missed it. But why were her medical documents never corrected? Annika would surely have known the mistake once the birth certificate of her child had been completed. Was it one of those things she had meant to do and never gotten around to, forgotten with time?

Or had she simply not cared? She had given her child up, after all.

Without that simple mistake she would have been an unknown, a ghost. That, and one other thing. Rylor. He shouldn't have survived either.
History, all about us, Augustus thought, continuing to look about his room. We are all but history, each and every one of us.

He looked at Annika's records, her life, her history. He looked the portrait picture that accompanied them. He had studied that face. Committed it to memory. There were only two ways this ended.

Either Annika died, or he did.

Either way, someone's history would reach its ultimate conclusion.

'Not mine. Not while I'm breathing,' he said, to no one in particular.

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Enforcer Vessel "Gorgon's Fury"
Armory, 05:27 hours Earth equivalent.
1 hour 33 minutes until planetfall.
'You have questions.'

'I have some questions'

'And they are?' asked Celeste.

She stood in front of Rylor as he sat a short distance apart from the others. All about them was the hustle and bustle of troops preparing for battle: Sounds of weapons being loaded. Of armor powering on. Barrack room talk. Some laughter, some prayers. It was all there,

just as Rylor remembered it. This was second nature to him. He could almost convince himself that this was just another drop. Almost.

He stopped what he was doing and looked up at Celeste.

‘Why do your Enforcers wear armor all day? I’ve rarely seen any of you in fatigues. Even your Captain was wearing it during the interrogation.’

Beside Rylor lay a row of various weapons seemingly in specific order, each the same distance from the item before it: serrated knife, molecular blade, ammo, grenades, sidearm, rifle, and something else Celeste recognised but could not believe.

‘He’s your Captain now, Rylor. And when on duty we wear it because most of us feel naked without it. You become used to it, like a second skin. It becomes a part of you.’

‘Not for me. I do the job, I go home. That’s it.’ He stood up and locked into place his chest plate, then turning his back on her he picked up his helmet.

‘How very admirable. But being an Enforcer isn’t a job. It’s a lifestyle. The armor is a part of that. It’s a part of who we are.’

‘For you, maybe.’ He turned to face her.

‘Not for you.’

Rylor thought: *that wasn't a question.* ‘Once maybe. Not so sure anymore.’

‘What changed?’

Rylor paused. ‘I got shot.’

‘We’ve all been shot. Or stabbed. Or nearly killed.’

Rylor couldn’t see it in her face, her default expression was unreadable, but he heard it in her voice. She was affronted. She

didn't – and couldn't – understand.

'By the enemy maybe. Not by one of your own,' he said.
Celeste pulled him further aside from the others. She was furious, yet barely spoke above a whisper. A few heads turned from the other side of the room to see what was happening. Celeste glared at them until they turned away.

'I don't want them to hear you talking like this. You bastard. When we spoke, you told me you'd be ready. Now you're "not so sure" anymore?'

Rylor shrugged off her grasp and secured his helmet. Familiar ice-blue lenses replaced his eyes and his tone became coldly mechanical. He didn't whisper back.

'My thoughts are my own. But I told you, I don't like having my skills questioned.'

He walked back to where his weapons lay in their ritualistic order. Celeste followed.

'So you keep saying. We're about to see. But sure as shit Rylor, if anyone gets killed because you couldn't pull the trigger, I'll kill you myself.' That turned a few heads again, and Celeste gave a two-finger reply to the rest her of squad.

'Seems fair.' Rylor was nonplussed. Even without seeing his expression Celeste knew he wasn't lying. His body language was too sure of itself.

'Now I've got a question,' she said.

'Which is?'

'I don't believe it, but is that – is that a sawn-off shotgun?'

'It is.' Rylor picked it up. It was the last weapon in the row.

'Where in the galaxy did you get such a thing?'

‘An antiques trader several tours back. Can’t remember where. I bought it for an ornament more than anything, display piece. See all the carvings on the side?’

She did so. It had engravings in a flourish pattern along the barrel.

‘It was old and battered but it looked interesting, and all the parts were present. So I cleaned it out. Just to see if I could get it working,’ Rylor turned it over in his hands and opened the chambers to look through the barrels. ‘So I kept it with me, something to do during downtime.’ He loaded two shells from a pouch on his belt and clicked it closed.

‘Then one engagement, I can’t remember where exactly – I get confused if it’s my fourth or fifth tour – but we’re fighting rebels. It’s a mixed force, human, alien. Skirmish really. But ammo’s low, we’ve done our job and we’re waiting on evac. Then out of nowhere comes a damned Teraton. You ever fought one of those?’ Celeste nodded.

‘Then you know how big they are. Appears right in front of us and kills the first guy that rushes it, just smashes him into the ground. Then it picks me up and starts crushing my throat. My armor’s buckling. I’ve dropped my rifle, my sidearm’s empty. I reach for whatever I can and there’s this shotgun strapped on my leg. Pull the trigger and – boom! Teraton blood all over my armor. Took the thing’s head clean off. She saved my life that day. Ever since I’ve taken her everywhere with me.’

Celeste noticed Rylor had stopped referring to the weapon as an “it”.

‘I don’t remember ever firing her before that. You know, I don’t even remember loading her that day, but I must have. Maybe just to see if she worked? I know I didn’t intend to ever use her. You don’t think of these things until later on, when it’s all over, about how the smallest thing saves your life. What if I’d never have bought her that day? What if I’d never tried to fix her?’

Rylor let out a breath. ‘She’s a last ditch weapon, but when she goes off, it’s bloody. There aren’t a lot of things that can take two full

rounds of buckshot up close and not be cut clean in two. Even wearing Forge Father armor, it'll take the wind out of you and maybe more.'

'You keep referring to it as a "her".'

'Because it is a "her". She's called Artemis.'

'You name your weapons.' A statement, not a question, Rylor noted.

'Absolutely. Don't you?'

'No.'

'Well I do. Always have. You've met Artemis. This here is Athena' he pointed to his sidearm, 'and this is Nemesis' and pointed to his rifle. 'They're named after ancient Gods of Earth.'

'You handle them with a touch that borders on a caress.' Rylor looked at her as she pointedly laid a hand on her own rifle and carried on. 'Personification, objectification. These aren't weapons for you. They're relics. Must have been tough, being separated. I imagine you probably sleep with them and celebrate their birthdays'

Rylor stared at her, silent. At least, he hadn't stopped facing her and Celeste presumed he was staring behind the lenses of his helmet.

'You do, don't you.' She cocked her head and stared back.

Another statement; not a question.

'I don't celebrate their birthdays. But I do sleep with them. They're never more than an arm's reach from me. To tell you the truth; it has been strange not having them with me. Having them secured away in the Armory was like having something removed, call it phantom limb pain. Ever since I became a First Recon I've never been without them. Now, kindly get out of my head.'

'It's the same for our armor, Rylor. Spend enough time with something, it becomes a part of you.'

‘Maybe it’s not so different after all.’ Was that amusement in his voice?

He finally turned to his weapons in the blink of an eye had sheathed them all. It was akin to artistry, or playing an instrument. His hands disappeared then reappeared and in a matter of seconds each weapon was holstered and secured. Celeste did not doubt Rylor could draw them just as quick.

‘These weapons you use, and one you were shot with. They are not standard Enforcer weaponry. They’re not laser. They’re ballistic,’ said Celeste.

‘Correct.’

‘Why?’

‘Blunt and to the point. Would it kill you to speak with a little decorum?’ Rylor said as he was pulling on his gloves. Celeste raised an unamused eyebrow at him.

‘No? Fine. To answer your question, there are a couple of reasons. First, the Genling 45 Assault Rifle Enforcer Variant is an exceptional weapon for what it does. In protracted engagements or crowd control it has no peer. A highly accurate laser with no shattering effect, no overheating and little supply required. But the rifle draws attention. It is bright, and barring the sniper modification, it is loud. This you already know.

Rylor raised his own rifle, Nemesis.

‘What you might not know, however, having probably never used ballistic,’ Celeste shook her head to indicate Rylor was correct in his assumption, ‘is that these weapons, despite their age, can still offer very specific advantages. First, mine are silenced, no flash no sound, but unlike the silenced Genling there is no significant increase in weight. ‘

‘Second, modifications allow for specific ammunition. I’ll be using Claw rounds. These bullets de-accelerate rapidly due to deformation

– hence the name Claw – but upon impact transmit their energy to surrounding tissue, causing massive local damage. Miniature explosions, essentially. As the Plague does not wear armor and relies on mutated flesh and bone for protection, these prove particularly effective.'

'Despite remaining the cheap weapon of choice for the civilians and scum of the universe, ballistic can still fulfil a battlefield role. These may be ballistic, but you'll find nothing like them outside of armed forces. These are specialist weapons: there's not many like them, and these are mine.

'In summary, Interrogator, the Genling 45 is a sledgehammer. In the use of force it is unparalleled. But ballistic weapons are a scalpel, and First Recon perform some very fine work.'

'Sounds pretty Rylor, and you believe what you say,' Celeste countered. 'But ballistic is small arms and Enforcers aren't known for subtlety. I can't think of a circumstance where I would prefer ballistic over laser.'

'Because you're a soldier, Celeste. But me? I'm a goddamn surgeon.'

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Enforcer Vessel "Gorgon's Fury"
Location: Gamma Tau, Low Orbit.
Briefing Room, 06:00 hours Earth equivalent
14 days since First Recon's failed extraction / 1 hour until planetfall.

'Enforcers of the Council.' Celeste's voice cascaded across the crowd and it immediately fell silent, the hubbub of the twenty Enforcers dying down in an instant as all turned rapt with attention to the Interrogator.

Rylor was surprised to see her on the small stage of the room, for only moments before they had been walking together from the armory. He was even more surprised to realise it was apparently Celeste who was to give the briefing, and not the Captain. Instead, Augustus was stood to the side of the raised floor, his bulk in the

shadows a familiar sight to Rylor these past two weeks.

Rylor had only to look about him in the midst of the armored congregation to see the loyalty the Interrogator, the Captain, and the Council had inspired. All the Enforcers stood solemnly, waiting for Celeste to begin. There was a large vid-screen behind her depicting the Capital, Gamma Prime.

The situation was near identical to the time Rylor had first entered the room; the crowd of Enforcers, the respectful silence, Augustus standing above. Now, however, Celeste stood above them too.

'Here is what we know: The Plague is present on this world and the responsible Artefact has gone missing. Our target is the human responsible for the disappearance, Annika Sanne. She was an Enforcer,' and with that revelation some of the crowd began to murmur.

'Furthermore she was a member of the First Recon squad that touched down on Gamma Prime. The three surviving Enforcers secured the Artefact, whose location Annika herself had discovered, before she shot her squad in the back and took the Artefact herself,' and with that there was a positive uproar. None could believe it.

The shuttle footage of Rylor's almost-execution played behind Celeste as she stepped aside, giving all present a crystalline view of the most painful experience of Rylor's life. He saw the Third go down as Annika unloaded a bullet in the back of his skull. He saw himself turn, before being shot once, twice, and falling. He saw her take the Artefact and leave the shuttle. The footage ended there. It did not show Rylor's survival.

The crowd all about him was asking questions, conversing harshly, calling to the Interrogator for answers – it was wrong, unthinkable, downright evil that an Enforcer would turn on one of their own – It went against everything the Enforcers were! – Didn't Annika know what they fought for? – What it meant to be an Enforcer of Humanity and the Council?

And yet there was her betrayal, clear for all to see.

When Celeste had spoken her name a portrait of Annika had filled the vid-screen alongside the footage. Annika's larger-than-life eyes gazed across the Enforcers she had deceived. Rylor knew that face better than any; and though none present knew it, Rylor knew she was looking directly at him. Whereas once those larger-than-life eyes had held admiration and maybe even love when she had gazed at him, seeing them now, they held only a coldness of which Rylor was unsure if he could ever match.

Celeste lowered her hands in a gesture of quiet, and again, the crowd fell silent.

'Annika Sanne leaves the Recon shuttle with the Artefact and is immediately secured by a second unknown shuttle. The second shuttle was not standard military issue. We are talking Black Operations, ladies and gentlemen, a shadow military. It may be the Corporation going against Council wishes, or it may be rogue assets. We do not know.

'Some of you may be thinking this deployment is a basic search-and-retrieval. Find the shuttle, neutralise the target, secure the Artefact. Not so simple. As I know some of you have already heard, allow me now to confirm: Gamma Prime's entire surveillance network has been wiped. Total blackout. We do not know where that shuttle went, nor do we have the time or resources to sweep the planet.

'However, every Corporation divisional headquarters carries backups of all footage. While we cannot retrieve backup surveillance remotely, we can access those backups manually. And that is exactly what we are going to do. So in short, our first objective is this: gain access to Corp HQ and secure the footage. Then we let the tech-boys do their magic and map the shuttle's flight path. Our second objective is then search and retrieval. I know you will all be *very* eager to show Annika just exactly how wrong she was to do what she did. Any questions?'

Celeste's delivery was performed with her usual swagger, an assurance of self-confidence that was unbreakable, but also refined, less abrasive than her typical tone.

It was clear that the Enforcers had many questions, but there was a moment of silence before any voices were raised as Celeste swept her gaze across the room.

A male voice from the back spoke up, the vocal-amplifier not entirely negating what could only be a co-prosperity world accent.

‘How many infected are we facing?’

‘Three hundred and fifty minimum. Likely more.’

‘Any estimates of how many of each stage?’

‘Standard approximation of contagion spread estimates one Stage Two for every three Stage Three’s. Working these figures backwards, we estimate at least four Stage One’s.’

Rylor thought he heard the Enforcer who had asked the question almost begin a third, but Celeste had a way of answering that dissuaded making her repeat herself. She turned as another voice spoke up, a female one.

‘Any idea why Annika did it?

‘Ask what you really mean, Roza.’

‘Fine, I’ll ask what clearly everyone is thinking. Did Annika go insane? And are any of us going to as well? We’ve all heard stories of what these Artefacts can do.’

‘We’ve all heard stories about what you’re willing to do on leave as well Roza. Doesn’t make them true, does it?’ A few Enforcers laughed, Roza herself one of them. ‘But no. You all saw the footage. Were those the actions of an Enforcer who had lost her mind? No. What she did was calmly and coolly executed, with no signs of distress. She knew exactly what she was doing. While there are unconfirmed reports of repeat exposure to these Artefacts possibly causing insanity – that is all they are, unconfirmed.’

‘Thank you Interrogator.’

‘What’s the plan to access Corp HQ?’ the Enforcer next to Rylor said, folding his arms.

‘You read my mind, Enforcer Kallon. Right, moving onto part two,’ and Celeste gestured behind her, the vid-screen manifesting a three-dimensional map of Gamma Prime with three trails through it. She pointed as she spoke. ‘We will be approaching from the east, here, with the sun at our backs. Three seven-man squads led by Captain Augustus and sergeants Carthor and Voya will work their way through Gamma Prime. A low atmosphere shuttle will be our eye in the sky informing us of Plague movements. We’re going to navigate each street as it comes, and work our way quietly through that city.’

She paused as some regions of the map glowed a faint crimson, distant from the marked trails.

‘Most fighting is centred on remaining civilian resistance, which we will either avoid or bypass as quickly as possible. The routes you see on the screen are the three quickest, that is, if nothing gets in our way. Each of the three teams will take one route and we will converge at Corp HQ. Once at Corp HQ the first to arrive will scout the area while the second and third secure a fifty metre perimeter. First squad will enter HQ, secure the backups, and transmit the data. From there, if we can reach the shuttle landing by foot, we will. If not, we return to the landing zone and await further orders.’

‘Interrogator, you said we can’t access the backups remotely. Why can’t we? Surely the Council is able to override?’ said Kallon.

‘The Council can do a lot of things, but they can’t do the impossible. Remote access would be a huge security risk. Potentially, it only takes one bribe, one defector, or one mistake to leave a system wide open. Remote access is unavailable: the servers are purposely offline. Access requires entry to Corporation Headquarters, bypassing several layers of security, and only then are the backups made available. So, even we Enforcers must do it manually. Next question?’

‘Well if that’s the case how come we can remote access the initial footage in the first place?’

‘Because those servers are online, because they need to be – we can tell you're not a technician. I’ll spell it out for you: online servers have round-the-clock protection. Backup servers are offline. The whole point of having different systems of security is so that if one is breached, the other cannot be. Do you understand now? Do you feel smart? Or would you like me to explain how your weapon works also?’

‘We’re moving by foot through an infested city?’ Kallon seemed sceptical. Furthermore, he seemed nonplussed by Celeste’s tone and the smattering of laughter that follower her insults; Rylor sensed a familiarity between them.

‘Absolutely.’

‘If we go loud we’ll draw every damn infected to us.’

‘We are going to avoid engagement at all costs, hence the fly-over shuttle. If any squad is threatened with exposure they are to fall back and find an alternate route. If this is not an option they are find cover and wait. The other squads will continue onwards if possible.’

‘Orders regarding civilians?’

‘You won’t see any.’

‘And if we do?’

‘Standard orders: Population irrelevant. Evidence of Plague life forms our only concern. Civilians to be avoided if possible, use of lethal force authorised if necessary.’

‘Why don’t we just fly in, land on the roof of Corp HQ, and take the damn footage that way?’

‘Kallon, saying shit like that is why you’ll never make the Intelligence Corps,’ said Celeste, quickly followed by another scattering of laughter. ‘And it’s hard to do a one-to-one Q and A session in a room this big. I’ll get to the point, don’t worry now.’

Celeste stepped to the edge of the stage and looked down at him. ‘You think we’d have missed it if it was that easy? Corp HQ’s are purposely designed with slanted roofs so nothing can land on them. Furthermore, it took an entire First Recon team to extract the Artefact across the city in the midst of a full-scale outbreak. You think a shuttle that could fly despite the Deadzone wouldn’t attract every single Plague Stage One, Two and Three in the area? The Plague is desperate for a way off the planet. A shuttle landing will be a beacon for every infected within the entire city to come running.

Celeste stepped back. ‘For those of you that have never seen a Plague victim, here’s an image.’ The image of a horrendously mutated humanoid appeared on the vid-screen, flesh and bone grown out of all proportion.

‘That’s a Stage Three. Easy to put down, but retains enough intelligence to use tools and weapons, and most worryingly, pilot spacecraft, which is how the Plague spreads off-world and the reason why we cannot land a shuttle where they can reach it. Stage Two’s are the premier warriors, utterly lethal in melee,’ another image appeared. This creature – for a creature is all it could be called – bore resemblance to the previous image, but was twice the size of a man with elongated limbs and vicious claws. ‘And a Stage One? Well, Stage One's are those first infected by the Artefact. And they're the worst of the lot. A bestial intelligence and cunning makes them ideal leaders.’ A third and final image appeared, a hulking monstrosity of bone and muscle and sinew.

The room had gone quiet. Celeste turned from the vid-screen back to the crowd.

‘The Plague is the stuff of nightmares. Now, these creatures aren’t dumb, unlike poor Kallon here. They exist to spread. Any plague that sees a shuttle will be drawn to it. They know it's a way off the planet. So we fly low, and land outside the city limits. We make our way in and out again, nice and quiet, and then either back to the LZ or onto the target if so possible.’

Rylor felt a shadow fall across him, and for no reason he could discern, sensed he was being watched. From the shadows of the

platform, he saw Augustus looking directly at him as Celeste finished her words.

Celeste asked for any more questions. When none were forthcoming, Augustus stepped forward and dismissed them to the launch bay.

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Rylor looked around him as the room emptied, and seeing Celeste last, fell into step alongside her.

'What do these people know about me?' He spoke low, and gestured to the Enforcers in front of them.

'What do they know about you?' she repeated. 'Nothing.'

'You're telling me twenty Enforcers just blindly accepted the presence of a First Recon appearing on board after a failed deployment, without putting two and two together?'

'They're not fools. They know you were a part of the operation. They know you survived. That's all they know, and all they need to. They don't know who you are, what your past is, or what Annika was to you. You may choose to tell them, if you so wish. I'll not stop you.'

'I presumed Augustus had told them, and that was the reason for the two weeks of silence. I was a pariah, the lover of a traitor.'

'On named terms without titles, are you, you and the Captain? And no, not so. *Captain,*' she emphasised the word 'Augustus informed all Enforcers you were not to be disturbed, under any circumstances. He wanted to see how you would perform, what you would do, denied any outlet of support beyond what you could muster from within. He wanted to see if what had happened would break you; whether the silence would break you'.

She stopped walking and faced him. 'Look at it from our perspective. You survived Gamma Tau, Rylor, but could you survive yourself? Could you really accept what happened, and move beyond

it, with no help, no aid from anyone?' Celeste didn't wait for an answer as she walked away, speaking over her shoulder to reply. 'Because you know as well as I that is what it means to be an Enforcer. To do the things others cannot.'

Rylor caught up to her as she continued: 'If the time comes and you have to put a bullet into Annika, it will be only you and her. No one can help you in such moments. No aid is to be found. It is instinctual, your training honed into an art of war: you, her, the sights and the trigger. In those moments, we know what we are, and what we are not. We had to know what you were, but more importantly, what you could become again. And here you are. An Enforcer.'

'Your rhetoric is good, Celeste I'll give you that. Seems you can speak with decorum when needed, after all.'

'I'm not entirely a bitch.'

'You know those reports *are* confirmed, of the Artefacts causing insanity'.

'Of course I know that' she whispered, the nearest Enforcers only several steps in front. 'But I am an Interrogator, and you're First Recon. We need to know these things. But them?' Celeste nodded toward the rest of the Enforcers. 'They don't. They're the frontline of the Council, an elite guard. They're soldiers; not officers, not scientists. They don't need to know what those things can do. Telling them would only cause fear. It would aid nothing.'

'Don't you think they deserve to know what they're facing?'

'They're Enforcers. What they're facing is a hostile galaxy, and everything that incorporates. They know their roles, their abilities, and most importantly, the risks. And they do not shy from them. You should have more faith.'

'Faith is hard to come by once shattered,' he muttered through gritted teeth.

'Don't give me the high and mighty then the low and sorry, Rylor.

Any Enforcer in my position, who knew what I knew, would tell you the same. We operate on a need to know basis. That's what we agree when we sign up. It is the Will of Council, who see the galaxy as a whole, and that's what they have decided is best. You think you know better than them? Besides, it is only repeat exposure that is confirmed to cause insanity.'

Rylor nodded in response. 'He's grooming you for Command,' he said after a moment.

'Who is?'

'Augustus.'

Celeste shrugged and continued looking straight ahead.

'I saw you in there. It's the way you gaze at people. You anticipate them. You see through them. If eyes could undress then we'd all have been naked.' Rylor turned forward; they were almost at the launch bay.

'It's a skill, I'll grant you that,' said Celeste.

Her voice was distant.

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Enforcer Shuttle GF02
Location: Gamma Tau, Atmosphere.
07:00 hours Earth equivalent
6 minutes until drop.

The Stallion sped through the atmosphere, shaking as it met with the planet's atmospheric resistance.

This is it, thought Rylor. *Six minutes and counting.* The lights in the shuttle were a deep crimson, illuminating everything with a bloody glow.

And in six minutes they would turn green as the side door opened, and Rylor would again be treading the mud of the planet he hated

so much.

Gamma Tau had taken everything from him. It had almost taken his life. While he didn't wish for death he knew a part of him would welcome the release.

And about that, he wasn't sure what he felt.

Sadness? Anger? Betrayal?

Something more?

Or something less?

A maelstrom of emotion, of love and hate, was coursing through him, twisting his veins and arteries with each violent jerk of the heart, pumping the blood, the blood –

Silence.

Rylor cut his thoughts dead. He performed the breathing exercises he had been taught, a meditative state to cleanse the mind and steady the flesh.

He had not lost everything.

He was still alive, still breathing. He'd seen enough death to know that survival was the most powerful drive of any sentient being. Surviving was an end unto itself.

And he had a child, still. A daughter. How he would look at her ever again, and not see Annika, he would never know. How he would explain what had happened to her mother, he had not yet thought. He couldn't yet explain it to himself. *But that is not her fault,* he told himself. *Must she pay for the sins of her mother?*

Yes, the part of him that welcomed death said. *All we are is but the sins of the parents. The same wrongs perpetuate. The same hates. We all must pay.*

And this voice, this emotionless, nihilistic voice, would not be

silenced.

Rylor opened his eyes and looked around him. Celeste sat beside him, gently rolling a knife in her palm. Kallon, the Enforcer Celeste had berated in the briefing, sat across from him. He was heavy weapons it seemed, his armored bulk a mobile bastion built for combat. Rylor thought: *I suppose he's our insurance, should something go wrong.* Beside Kallon was secured a Genling variant tri-barrel; *a minigun in colloquial terms*. *How elaborate we name our instruments of death.* And Rylor gripped his rifle Nemesis tight.

He did not know the names of the other Enforcers but soon names wouldn't matter. All that mattered in the field was their assigned numbers.

Captain Augustus sat at the head of the shuttle, directly beneath one of the lights. The crimson washed over him, casting the Captain in hues of red and black shadow.

'Five minutes and counting' the pilot's voice crackled over the internal speakers. All about Rylor the Enforcers began to go about their own rituals, each honed into a fine art.

Everyone has a pre-battle ritual. Everyone. Some checked gear, a methodical approach to steel the mind. Someone said prayers, to steel the soul. Rylor wasn't a religious man, and it amused him that some Enforcers prayed, but he didn't resent those who believed. Whatever it took to get a soldier to fight was worth something. Some, he knew, even prayed to the Council. How they would feel about such deification was anyone's guess.

He unconsciously recalled the last time he had been present in such circumstances, and for a second, he thought saw Annika. *Then he did see Annika*. She sat in her usual place opposite him, the light casting a shadow across her, her deceptively lithe figure encased in armor. They must have missed her – but how did they miss her? – he saw her there, staring at him – she raised her rifle – he was too slow –

He blinked and she was gone, and in her place was Kallon again, checking his own weapon.

‘Comm check’ spoke a voice in his ear. Augustus. ‘01, Augustus, checking in.’

‘02, Allenova, checking in,’ said Celeste. *So that was her surname,* thought Rylor. *And a powerful one at that.* Allenova was one of the largest conglomerates in the Co-Prosperity sphere of worlds.

‘03, Hath, checking in.’

‘04, Kallon, checking in.’

‘05, Shiqar, checking in.’

‘06, Rarkov, checking in.’

‘07, Ings, checking in.’

Now their names were meaningless, no matter how powerful. They had become numbers in the Enforcer machine, and in the fading echo of each he heard the names and numbers of his former squad mates resounding through his skull, each akin to a bullet.

Bang: One. Bang. Bang. Two, three.

Gamma Tau’s Enforcer body count was three, and suddenly he was filled with a white-hot rage. *Annika will be the fourth,* he told himself. *The treachery would be paid in kind, in full.*

Celeste sensed a change in Rylor next to her. He had been deep in meditation, leaning on his rifle. Now he sat up straight against the shuttle wall, gripping his Genling tight.

Well, something’s stirred him, she silently mused.

The Enforcer next to Kallon leant forward and lifted a hand to get Rylor’s attention.

‘What’d you reckon our chances are?’ he said.

An accented voice: it was 03 who spoke, the Enforcer Hath.

Rylor leant forward and turned to look at Augustus. The Captain sat immobile, giving no indication of his thoughts. Seeing no reason to stop, Rylor continued.

‘Depends what you mean,’ he had to speak up over a sudden roar of engines. *We must be getting close*. ‘Chances of what? Survival? Securing the artefact?’

‘Chances of saving this planet.’ Hath responded.

Celeste observed Rylor out of the periphery of her vision. She sensed his hesitation, and it spoke of calculation; he was weighing his words as he had done to her the first time they spoke.

Another roar of engines filled the silence.

‘This is your first time fighting the Plague, isn’t it?’ Rylor eventually said.

‘How’d you know that?’ replied Hath.

‘You don’t get it, do you? Gamma Tau is already lost. The planet is dead. It was dead the moment patient zero turned. We’re not here to save the planet. We’re here to destroy it.’

‘Destroy it? What'd you mean?’

‘We go in, recover what we can, then we leave. Once we’re done, so is Gamma Tau.’

‘Then why the hell are we dropping in? Nuke the damned rock.’

‘Council edict number one: Contain outbreak. Preserve infrastructure.’

‘We’ve contained the damned outbreak! And it hasn’t spread far beyond the Capital has it? We raze that, and everything inside it, and we’ve secured the rest of the planet!’

03 is an emotional one, considered Rylor. *His voice betrays him.*

Perhaps he has family here?

‘I presume Captain Augustus wants to know the why before the what.’

‘And just what does that mean?’ Hath said, looking from Rylor to the Captain and back.

Augustus remained silent.

‘Why it happened, before what do we’re going to do about it. We already know the answer to the second question, but before we execute, we try to answer the first. If we can, maybe we can stop it happening again on another world. If we can’t, well, it means some other populated rock will have to suffer the same fate before we get another chance at it. You got family out there?’ Rylor nodded toward the window.

An insightful question, Celeste thought.

‘Some,’ Hath admitted. ‘My brother’s a mining contractor for the Razzak Corp. They were given a lease from Reiker when Gamma Tau first opened. We don’t talk much, but last I heard he’s still here.’

‘Where?’

‘He was based in Gamma Secundus. Forty-eight kilometre, as the shuttle flies.’

‘Second largest city on the planet. I can see why you’d want this place saved. I’m from the Frontier myself.’ Rylor smiled, but Hath couldn’t see it. ‘One of the reasons I became an Enforcer. There’s no chance of something like this happening on a GCPS world. They’ve already been scoured. But the frontiers? There’s a lot of scary shit out there we haven’t got a clue about, and some of these poor bastards aren’t so lucky.’ He paused. ‘And then some people, people like you and me, have family on these frontiers.’

‘I always feared it could be my planet next,’ said Hath. ‘I never stopped to think about my brother’s.’

‘You have to stop thinking like that.’ Rylor’s tone had become cold.

‘What’d you mean? Like what?’

‘Like you’re still a person. Like you have a family. Like you mean something. You’re a number now, 03. And the sooner you realise that, the sooner you can operate the way an Enforcer is supposed to operate. Without mercy. Without fear. Without compassion. None of us get out alive. We’re all already dead. The best thing you can do for your family now is forget them and be worthy of the title “Enforcer”. Give them a good compensation for when you die.’

Hath’s reply was slow, the sentence drawn out like the slow cut of a knife: ‘You telling me how to do my job?’

The tension in the shuttle had become palpable.

‘You’re the one who asked,’ said Rylor, and he leant back against the wall, indicating he conversation was over.

Hath continued regardless.

‘What right have you got to tell me what to do?’ he said. ‘You’re not an officer –’

‘But he is First Recon.’ Celeste’s voice stopped Hath in his tracks. ‘And he has fought the Plague before, and you haven’t. And besides,’ she continued with mirth in her words, ‘you *did* ask. Maybe you’d like to ask me something next, 03?’

Her challenge had the desired effect. The tension broke, and though it was not entirely absent, Celeste knew she now governed it.

‘No, you’re alright 02.’

‘Funny that. And here was me, thinking you were so eager to talk.’

The authority that woman has over her fellow Enforcers is not solely born of rank; it is something more, observed Rylor as he settled back into his drifting thoughts. And though he knew so little about her,

one thing reminded him desperately of Annika: *she's dangerous*.

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The minutes after the exchange between Rylor and Hath passed in silence. Eventually the pilot's voice crackled over the speakers indicating they were only thirty seconds from drop. It had not been required. Each Enforcer had been subconsciously counting down the seconds until deployment.

Augustus was the first to rise. The light from the shuttle turned green, and as the side door opened, each Enforcer dropped several feet onto the soft turf below, their armored boots making a dull thump as the ground compacted beneath their sheer weight.

05 Shiqar and 03 Hath immediately took several steps forward and secured the area, kneeling low and sighting down their Genlings for any possible threats. They remained motionless as the rest of the squad filtered out behind them, each taking a compass point to observe as Augustus knelt and contacted Carthor and Voya, the sergeants designated to lead the second and third squads respectively.

The Stallion took off, gaining little altitude, roaring back the way it came. The Enforcers lay down, and began to play the waiting game.

Though Rylor performed his role with the finely drilled expertise of a decade of service, it was an out-of-body experience. He gripped his rifle Nemesis and sighted down its recon scope, slowing his breath to steady his aim. Though he knew he would not hesitate to fire should something move, doing this again, here, was surreal: Only two weeks standard time had it been since he was here last, and in that time his personal world had come crashing down with the speed of a bullet. *Or two, technically,* he thought.

He could not shake the sense of foreboding, this he accepted, but he could compartmentalise it. His own indifference surprised him. Only minutes before he had felt a white hot rage sudden and sharp like the lighting of a flare within him, possessing him. Now he felt nothing. The fire had turned to ash within.
This was good. He could focus.

His breathing slowed further, an ever-reducing steady rhythm. His hands did not waver. His scope did not move.

He could hear Augustus behind him communicating with the other squads and he sensed that simultaneous coiling of relaxation and tension in the Enforcers about him; all were immobile, silent, but ready to unleash should a threat make itself visible.

There was no need.

The gently rolling turf of Gamma Tau spread out before them, rising away into hills which led into forests – or perhaps a great singular one, as far as the eye could see. They had set down behind an embankment and now slithered to its top, the vantage point giving a panoramic view of the surrounding area. If Rylor could have still felt such things, he would have considered the surrounding scenery beautiful in its virgin innocence: nothing save the grass moved in an almost breathless wind. Once upon a time, he would have liked to bring Annika here. It was serene. It was peaceful.

Too peaceful. Whatever creatures had once lived here, whatever grass-dwelling mammals or birds, they had surely fled as the Plague had consumed the sentient life.

Even the animals know to avoid this place, Rylor told himself. *And we're meant to be an intelligent species.*

A young cream-yellow sun crested the horizon of greenery at their back, the forest several kilometres away stretching out around and above them into an unknown horizon. This was a young world, a valuable world, one that by all accounts held great riches in ore and mineral and yet had no indigenous threat – or so all had thought.

Light years from the death zone of worlds, and here we are, hunting another Artefact.

Rylor's bitter thoughts permeated his flesh, and he almost longed for a threat to make itself known so he would have the release of a kill.

He had denied death, but he would not deny another.

It only lasted a moment, the emotion fading as quickly as it had risen. A pervading thought emerged in its wake: what possible ruins of civilisations lay under their feet? Each Artefact had been found on worlds where empires and risen and fallen, peoples who had reached their apex then faded into the long dark history of nothingness.

And Rylor thought: *this is what we all are to become. Nothingness.*

His breath crested the lips of his mouth, slow and silent. Still nothing made itself known in the vision of his scope.

The breeze picked up and the grass lay down before it in surrender.

Still nothing.

They were three kilometres from Gamma Prime: In the northern distance in an open valley lay the Capital. The tops of the towers could be seen from here, the morning sun catching them and lighting them akin to a metallic mirage – was it truly there? A promise of safety and civilisation, should one not have known the insidious threat of this world.

Yet from this distance, there was no denying Gamma Tau was peaceful. Far removed from life and home, from the stresses of so-called civilised life, with only the wind and sun for company, one could be truly alone here and would not want for anything. The necessities for life were all around.

But Rylor had seen the horrors this planet held. And despite the mocking neutrality of the planet, the Enforcers had brought instruments of death.

The sun rose to the mid-morning height of its day-cycle. The low atmosphere shuttle, just out of sight beyond the drifting clouds, had reported little Plague movement. What infected was left in the city was still laying siege to the remaining bastions of armed civilians fighting for survival.

Augustus stood, satisfied that all the pieces were in place. Carthor and Voya had arrived and were now ready to approach from the western plain and the north-east ridge. Each Stallion shuttle had had to take convoluted routes to fly low and avoid detection, but each squad was now within the same distance. Augustus' calculations estimated a simultaneous time of arrival at Corp HQ should nothing go wrong.

Augustus uttered two words: 'move out', and his squad instantly rose in fluid gracefulness that belied their lethality. Where but a moment ago they had been lying in the grass to conceal their location, each Enforcer emerged with a deft swiftness into a crouched run, weapons poised.

They covered the kilometres between them and the city in a matter of minutes. Augustus had estimated forty minutes from their hilltop position to Corp HQ. While the open grassland would prove little effort for the power-assisted armor and military conditioning of the Enforcers, the block-by-block streets of Gamma Prime would have to be navigated carefully.

This thought dominated the Captain's mind as his squad approached the first habtainers, the grassland giving way to well-trodden mud and concrete.

This was how colonisation was done: entire small cites laid overnight in a strictly functional capacity, the blocks of habtainers forming the necessities for life and work to immediately begin. Between the cities and places of work were laid the roads, direct as possible. Mining equipment was deposited, a shuttle port formed, and if they should prove inhospitable, indigenous populations put down.

And thus man's civilisation grew amongst the stars.

Gamma Prime was the first and largest settlement of the planet. As per standard accelerated colonisation the city had grown out from its habtainers into a latticework metropolis, each new layer built on the one before. Still at the core of many buildings were the standard cube habtainers acting as foundations, the newer constructs built upon them. As the city grew and new needs emerged, the

habtainers were repurposed, rebuilt or removed entirely to make way for metal and glass as the larger interstellar ships finally arrived. In only a matter of years the end result was one of great height and blocks.

And as buildings grew in importance so did their height: at the heart of it all lay the Corporation HQ. The tower dominated the capital, casting its shadow across the lesser towers and habitats, lest any here forget whom they worked for.

The squad took slow, steady steps onto the first roads, empty now, save for abandoned vehicles. Their boots made soft crunching noises as loose gravel was crushed underneath the weight of the Enforcers. It was the only sound that broke the silence; from here even the sounds of the fighting that was occurring could not be heard.

Pray it stays that way, thought Augustus. *Silence is our friend and ally here.*

Augustus motioned and Rylor took point, several steps ahead of the squad. As the only one who had traversed these streets before, and as the specialist in reconnaissance, Augustus and the squad were relying on him – as much as any Enforcer relied on anyone but themselves – to lead them through as quickly and deftly as possible.

This was the way we tried to flee, the dark voice within Rylor spoke. *Augustus knows this. And now you re-enter willingly, mixing the past and future, though both end the same.*

The landscape of Gamma Prime was a harsh world removed from the calmness of the surrounding greenery. Rylor stepped the same steps he had before, and saw two cities: one was here and now, bones of a silent city, grey… and lifeless. A second was bloody crimson, filled with violence and hurt. One timeline flowed into him and the other from him and it was in his vision they converged as one.

The towers swallowed them as Rylor led them through the city streets, each Enforcer continually scanning the doorways and windows for any sign of threat. The signs of battle and death where

all around: laser burns, blast marks, and black-red stains littered the streets.

No bodies, thought Rylor. *There are never any bodies. The Plague does not take captives.* And he was glad that should he die, his corpse would turn to ash inside his armor.

Though they would likely hear the Plague before they saw it, the animalistic nature of its intelligence would know when to be quiet, should the Enforcers tread too loud. The Plague understood the notion of "ambush", and the Enforcers were not on friendly soil.

The squad progressed deeper into Gamma Prime, their progress slow but silent. Augustus continued to maintain semi-regular contact with the shuttle above and Carthor and Voya's squads, and each reported the same thing: silence. Had not the shuttle confirmed that the Plague's activity was still focussed on the civilian resistance several blocks away, Augustus would have found the silence unsettling. As it was, he was grateful for it, and grimly acknowledged that Rylor was the superior point-man, and if Rylor felt concern he had not voiced it.

As it was, then, they were likely unseen.

The road here was blocked by an overturned transportation truck, which had spilled its load of labor supplies across the street, and Rylor led them through the broken floor-to-ceiling windows of the building. *Here is where the Sergeant died*, recalled Rylor as they passed through was could have once been a medical station of sorts, once-white walls and stainless steel giving a clinical impression. *His body and armor ash now; mixed with the ash of the planet of his demise.* He found the thought a coldly satisfying one. *Ashes and dust… ashes and dust*, and he dimly recalled a phrase from the Old Bible of Earth. *All we are is but ashes and dust… or something like that. But we are all to end.*

With that, he knew he would eventually lie with Annika one final time, but not in their marital bed.

They would lie together in the ground.

‘We’re here’ Rylor said, and the squad fanned out behind him on the first floor of the southern-most building overlooking Corporation Square, the plaza before the tower. There was no mistaking that crystalline-glass building.

He had led them here as they waited for the other squads to make their way to the centre of the city. The squad quickly went about fortifying their position, using overturned tables and shelving as makeshift barricades while blocking lines of sight from the exterior. Whatever the structure’s original purpose had been was unrecognisable now in the aftermath of the Plague outbreak.

Celeste watched the wraith-like movements of Rylor as he moved across the floor and lay vertical against the wall, looking out across the plaza. Whatever he thought or felt being here again, it had not affected his skillset – as he had promised. There was a surety of self in his actions, a confidence not born of arrogance but of an unshakeable self-belief in what he had been taught, and trained, and done.

And that confidence, Celeste further saw, contained violence. She saw it in the casual way he held his rifle. She saw it in the way he held himself. She even heard it in in the two words he spoke.

The squad settled down on the floor, taking positions at the windows and stairs above and below, as Augustus made contact with the other Enforcers.

‘Second squad has been delayed by a blocked route. They estimate a four-point-five minute delay. Third is in position, north-north-east,’ said Augustus.

Rylor looked out and saw the likely building he would have chosen had he been Voya leading the third squad; the squat building to the right, low ceilings and high windows providing a strong barricade and commanding position over the plaza. And sure enough, as he looked across, he saw faint signs of movement within that another would likely have missed.

Celeste moved across to Rylor, joining him on the opposite side of the window. She looked out across the city, trying to envisage what

it was he saw. ‘I never asked you,’ she said over comms, ‘but 07, where did you find the Artefact?’

‘04 Annika discovered the Artefact in a laboratory facility approx one-point-five kilometres south-west of here’ said Rylor, using Annika’s name to differentiate her from the current number allocation. ‘We had completed our objective, confirming the presence of Plague lifeforms but our drones reported a specific signal we knew to be the Artefact. Claiming it was an unmissable opportunity due to the uncommonly low number of Plague, 04 Annika suggested we retrieve the Artefact.

‘I believe now it was part of her betrayal and planned all along. She was right, the Plague numbers were uncharacteristically low, but upon nearing the city limits we were set upon by an entire horde. 01 and 02 were killed almost immediately while 03, 04 and myself continued to attempt extraction. I was carrying the Artefact, and I’ll admit I did not want to let it go now we had lost Enforcers. I wanted something to show for our body count.’

Celeste sensed an undercurrent of emotion beneath Rylor’s response. She doubted whether any of the others heard it, save Augustus perhaps. She pressed onward.

‘What exactly do you mean when you say, “planned all along?” You think Annika planned it the whole thing?’

Rylor looked at her sharply, saw only a mirror image of himself staring back: the stylised helmet of the Enforcers and the matte ice-blue of the eye lenses that made an Enforcer so impassive to behold.

‘I know that you know exactly what I meant, Interrogator,’ he said, though his tone belied the harshness of his words. ‘And I believe that you are asking this, here and now, because now you have seen my actions in the field, you can probe deeper with your questions. You see now, truly, I’m not broken. Furthermore, I’m much more likely to reveal personal trauma at the site where it happened. Nevertheless, I will answer.’

His words were formal, as formal as they had ever been when he spoke to Celeste. Both knew the squad listened to their exchange,

and not for the first time today, Rylor was once again at the centre of attention.

He continued: 'I believe that yes, the entire extraction may have been a set up. I do not know the how or the why of it. As hard as it is to believe what happened, did in fact happen, I believe my eyes. I know what I saw. We extracted the Artefact from the city before losing two First Recon. Not to some wandering horde, and not through our own lack of awareness. No, they were waiting, and took two lives almost immediately. Had it not been for our own skill, they would have killed another. And so we fled, outnumbered and outmatched, only to be turned on by our own.

'My opinion is this: what I saw was a clear path to the Artefact that ended in ambush and betrayal. The Plague attack thinned our numbers sufficiently to allow 04 Annika to finish the job. Had we lost two of our number before securing the Artefact, we would not have attempted to do so. It was not our objective. No, by allowing us to secure the Artefact and then losing it only once we had brought it to the edge of the city, I believe we did someone else's task for them. We didn't even have a chance to recover ourselves after the attack and so, computing the most efficient course of action, we ran. Being able to look back now and consider all that occurred, it strikes me as odd that the Plague did not catch up. It was almost as if once enough of us were dead, the Plague did not want nor care to catch us. We were hounded into our shuttle, no time given to process what occurred or how, but not caught. And in all your years of service Interrogator, how many do you know who have outrun the infected in a running battle without superior firepower? I'll tell you my guess: One. Just me. And I am not a superior athlete to those who have fallen. Nor were my former squad mates.'

Silence reigned as all present processed his words.

Rylor turned back to his vigil across the plaza as they waited for the other squads to take position.

He knows, thought Augustus, Rylor's words closely echoing his own report to High Command. *He knows he was allowed to recover the Artefact and then he was meant to die. An Enforcer become a puppet. But who pulled the strings? And why, if what Rylor suggests is true, that*

the Plague was contained or controlled enough to both set an ambush and then allow escape, did the perpetrators need an Enforcer squad to recover the Artefact in the first place?

A voice was heard over the comm channel: 'In position. We await your direction, 01.' It was Carthor, speaking on open frequency to each squad.

'You ready?' said Celeste to Rylor, speaking this time off comms.

He did not meet her gaze as he replied: 'We've already had that conversation.'

'I suppose we have.'

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Gamma Prime Corporation Headquarters
Location: Gamma Tau, Surface
07:52 hours Earth equivalent

'Clear.'

'Clear.'

'Clear.'

The word echoed within Augustus' earpiece as two Enforcer squads fanned out through the Corporation tower ahead of him, each taking an opposite stairwell, clearing the floors from opposing sides as they went. Voya's squad had remained on the lower floors to secure the entrance.

The server they sought was located on the twenty-second storey out of a total twenty-five. Though having entered the building and discovered the first floor hostile-free, there were still twenty-four more floors to clear before the building could be deemed safe enough to attempt the data extraction.

As safe as anything can be in a Deadzone, thought Augustus.

The three squads had converged on the tower from different approaches, taking no chances with the possibility of the Plague hidden inside. Just as driven as the infection was to seek new victims to spread its foul contagion, it could also recognise locations of importance and defend them as such. The Corporation tower meant nothing to the Plague, but it contained valuable information for the Enforcers, and in some black depth of the Plague's twisted capacity to think, something knew that. The Plague had an uncanny ability to make raids or defensive positions on locations of import.

It knew these locations drew new victims, new flesh for them to feast.

But how such creatures could know when to attack and when to defend, or when to fall back and when to press, no-one truly knew. At times, the Plague was a ravenous howling mob. At others, it displayed a sophisticated understanding of warfare tactics. Augustus had experienced that insidious resourcefulness first hand and it was this evidence of battlefield strategy which fuelled the theory that the Plague was a biological weapon intended for genocide. Each stage of the Plague had its role in propagation and these roles seemed hard-wired into the perverse DNA itself. No simple infection – regardless of its severity – was so capable, nor so dangerous. Furthermore, the discovery of Plague Stage Three's piloting space craft and using weaponry was proof enough that some level of intelligence was present; the infection 'gifted' its victims with an understanding of the operation of weapons and vehicles that went well beyond any explanation of retention of personality and memories.

So while the circling shuttle that Augustus had ordered to provide intel support from above continued to provide the same updates as before – that the Plague was focussed on the remaining civilian bastions – the Enforcers took no chances and swept through the building, clearing each room as they went.

And from each storey the same message was delivered: 'clear'.

The shuttle gives us an advantage, thought Augustus. *But it is not an all-seeing eye, and should the Plague be moving through the buildings, we would not know.*

Most Corporations had inherent shielding built into their habtainers, preventing all but the most powerful scanning technology from penetrating. In the cutthroat world of business politics knowledge was power, and every Corporation building was a potential wealth of knowledge. And so, due to corporate paranoia, the support shuttle only had eyes on the streets and public spaces.

The Gorgon's Fury stationed in orbit had the necessary hardware to scan the habtainer interiors but the few minutes it would take to do so and relay that information meant it would be nigh on useless. The Plague could move several buildings before they were informed it was even approaching.

No, the habtainers shielding was too strong for continual scanning and Augustus did not want his Enforcers relying on a crutch. Especially a delayed one. They had to know they were alone, reliant on themselves, as they were trained.

The Captain almost wished they had met resistance. *Do not look unfavourably upon favourable circumstances. But only a fool would blindly accept them,* he recalled from his training days. *And in all my experience, there is something wrong here.*

This speculation played out in his mind as he walked the stairs behind the vanguard.

Why was the Plague not here? Why had they met no resistance at all? The central tower was a location of importance to many, not just the Enforcers. Scavengers, mercenaries and rebels would inevitably come to plunder this world. Many would be here already, looting anything of value.

Augustus thought: *The Plague would surely know this. It has on previous worlds.*

So why not now?

Gamma Tau continued to pose questions to which Augustus had no answers. An unusual sensation rose within him; seeping from the belly of his gut to his cool logic of his mind, hazily drifting upward

like the cloud of smoke from the crater of a shell, obscuring all in its path.

It took him a moment to realise what the impact was.

It was doubt.

For so long he had fought in the surety he was informed of everything that pertained to his objectives. He was not concerned with wider politics or possible consequences beyond what his superiors and the Council of Seven informed him. He was an Enforcer, the iron gauntlet of humanity curled into a fist, the will of the Council made flesh and armor. Politics and subterfuge were both beneath and beyond him.
But all the while, Gamma Tau stank of politics. It positively reeked of it.

A frontier world with an Artefact; an Enforcer who betrayed their own; a shadow military which they had not yet encountered.

And now this: an open doorway to the information they desperately sought.

'Clear.' That word sounded again.

Much like Rylor Ings had theorised, the conditions were unnervingly favourable. *Too favourable,* Augustus' gut instinct said. His pulse began racing. *They are too favourable! Most would not question them in the midst of a Deadzone, such circumstances demand speed. The First Recon squad had not questioned and had been killed for it.*

At each turn their unknown enemy had predicted their movements: First Recon was first to respond to the outbreak. They were shepherded into Gamma Prime and then betrayed for the Artefact. The betrayal came from within. Annika Sanne's records were then encrypted and wiped with only the human error of a name misspelling to thank for proof of her existence at all.

Furthermore, Rylor Ings had spoken of a shadow military. While there was no physical evidence supporting this, absence of evidence

was not evidence of absence. Celeste had cleared him in interrogation; that was proof enough he was telling the truth.

Annika had taken the Artefact for some reason, reason enough to attempt to kill the father of her child and turn her back on everything she had ever known.

She had not gone insane. Augustus was sure of it. Her actions were too calculated.

So, on the likely assumption that Annika had taken the Artefact for some reason other than her own worship, that meant in turn, she had taken it for someone else.

The enemy was moving in the shadows, and without Rylor Ings, they would be entirely unaware of their foe. It was only Rylor's testimonial, and his sealing of the shuttle, which had preserved the proof of Annika's betrayal. Rylor survived when he shouldn't have: He pointed the Enforcers in the direction of Annika when she would have been assumed lost. Her armor signal was silent, presumed dead. But Augustus knew now she had likely abandoned it, though such an act would be unthinkable had the unthinkable not already occurred.

Many questions. No answers.

Yes, it was doubt he felt, Augustus realised. But it was not doubt in his abilities, nor those of his squad.

It was doubt as to the validity of this situation.

This had been the test of his theories: Had they met resistance then the Plague's modus operandi would not have changed. While any form of resistance would have made their job more difficult by tenfold, for once engaged their enemy would swarm, but he could have been confident then that they were not being led into a kill zone.

Instead he was being asked to believe that the Plague had fundamentally changed its methodology of battle.

Could an infection, a mutation, a biological weapon, whatever it was – could such a thing change its natural (or unnatural) function? Yes, it could adapt, in the same way animals adapt to their surroundings or aliens to human culture. But such creatures remain bound by their genetic coding and cannot progress beyond, history and evolution taught this. All mutations eventually die and the Plague was no different: once the infected world was devoured the contagion consumed itself and left no trace save the ruination of a civilisation; lost until man's conquest of the stars.

But – and here it was, that terrible, terrible query – could the Plague learn?

Could it, truly, evolve?

Were they watching it do so?

As the Captain strode higher through the building, placing one heavily armored boot after the other, the weight of his rifle solid and reassuring in his hands, Augustus' thoughts were pulled back to the conundrum he faced.

Augustus had remained silent during the shuttle descent to Gamma Tau, as Rylor had expunged his philosophy of life and death, for the Captain's mind was awash with the very real possibility he was leading his troops into the certainty of the latter. Augustus had narrowed his theories, dismissing the unlikely and weighing up the possible. He considered the mysteries and half-truths and speculations of the Plague. He used logic to form scenarios that as a soldier, he could answer. He distilled his thoughts into one, simple, question.

Knowing everything that had happened on Gamma Tau, which was more likely: that the Plague had evolved or this situation was orchestrated?

And as Augustus had asked himself that question, he realised already knew the answer.

His comms crackled into life, anchoring his thoughts to the present. 'Server located,' came Celeste's voice, her eloquent speech

unmistakeable.

There was no time to waste. He took the stairs two at a time, pushing past the Enforcer in front of him and reaching for his comms.

‘Crack that server quicker than you ever have before, 02. Force through any security. I do not care how much other data is lost as long as we get that flight path.’ His response was quick, his breathing quicker as he bounded up the stairs. ‘All Enforcers, defensive positions with a view to exit. We are leaving the instant we have secured the data.’

Augustus vaulted the final steps to the sever floor, his squad behind him, weapons ready.
The Enforcers had to get this data and leave as quickly as possible. Politics was an unfamiliar battlefield, but his was the mind-set of a solider. For two weeks in orbit he had considered naught but the most important fact: the enemy knew how they fought.

The enemy had turned a First Recon Enforcer.

Decades of training and warfare strategy drilled into him had become worthless. Whatever theories could be conjured as to the Plague’s behaviour, there was no doubting that Annika Sanne could likely predict the Enforcers response. She knew the procedure they would follow.

And Augustus had been forced to lead his troops into the Deadzone, unable to answer the one, vital, question.

How would she stop it?

Arriving at the twenty-second storey Augustus found Sergeant Carthor stood by the entrance to an interior enclosure: a floor-to-ceiling mesh wire fence dominated the room, running half its length and width, corridors either side. The remaining Enforcers had taken positions along the windows and were silhouetted by the sunlight, the unmistakeable lightness of Rylor Ings’ armor among them.

The enclosure protected a network of assorted computers, servers

and memory banks laid out in methodical fashion. All were untouched save for the largest one at which knelt Celeste. A small, oblong data-box was jacked in at various points and numerous lights on the obsidian server blinked rapidly as she mined the data.

Tick-tock, Augustus, he thought to himself.

Whereas the rest of the building had felt the full consequences of a containment protocol, laid to waste by either by the Plague or looters, this interior had remained untouched. *As it should. These rooms are built to withstand a siege if needed,* the Captain supposed, admiring with grim satisfaction the workman's effort here. He observed damage marks surrounding the fence entrance were the black paint had been chipped off and the cold metal beneath shined through. Someone, or something, had tried to break in at numerous points. Tried and failed.

Sergeant Carthor nodded as the Captain passed him. Celeste didn't look up as Augustus approached, too intent upon the task at hand. He looked down at the data-box display unit and saw she had begun the rebooting process of the servers. Permanently offline to protect them should the live servers fail or be breached, the process would only be a matter of minutes.
But time was not their friend here.

Tick-tock, he thought again.

'15,' he said, privately addressing Sergeant Voya over comms. 'Withdraw all stationed on the ground into the lower floors. Conceal yourselves, but keep eyes on the plaza and every entrance to it. I do not believe our presence here is as unnoticed as it seems. Should anything threaten to disturb us that we cannot hide from, kill it.'

'Acknowledged' Voya responded.

He allowed himself a deep breath, frustrated that he was being manoeuvred so. Even so, what could he have done differently? Annika had played this perfectly. Despite Rylor's survival – presuming she was unaware – she had a failsafe, forcing their hand, ensuring anyone that may come looking for her had to enter the Deadzone. He was being made to choose between two options that

both had a high probability of failure: search for her blindly or proceed to into a likely trap.

She had imposed the mathematics of defeat upon him; a most hateful equation. And he did not yet have an answer.

Augustus opened a second private comm channel to Rylor. '07, in your previous deployment, how similar are the circumstances we find ourselves in?'

'Suspiciously so, Captain,' Rylor replied. 'The failed operation encountered no resistance upon entrance to either the city or the Artefact's location. I know our shuttle reports the Plague is focussed on the civilian resistance, and that's to be expected, but still... we're in the middle of the damn Capital. You ever known a Deadzone so quiet?'

'Never,' said Augustus. 'And yet I am unaware of any other course of action we could have taken.'

'Annika is subtle. She is also extremely methodical. She will know we have to come here, and she will have prepared for us to do so.'

He thinks the same as I, thought Augustus. 'This I believe,' he said. 'Your thoughts?'

Rylor looked out across the urban landscape. He knew what he was being asked.

From this elevation he had a commanding view, high enough to see the grey blocks turn to green fields. High enough to almost feel removed from it all, removed from the world beneath. Whenever he stood above a city like this, he was glad to be an Enforcer. The horizon beckoned with unknown possibilities, and he would see them. Always he had enjoyed the sight of a great metropolis, the panoramic view of an artificial skyline testament to the achievements of his race.

But this one he hated. Smoke rose in the distance, permeated with flashes of gunfire. For a moment he wondered if he was witnessing his past, the scene playing out before him, a spectator removed

from interference.

What would your wife do? That's what Augustus was asking.

Or, to put it another way, a less personal way, how would he kill twenty-one Enforcers?

'I shouldn't be alive. But I am. I am living proof that Annika does not like loose ends. If we're here it's because she wants us here. Now, Captain, I would have once thought to never ask this question, but given what's occurred – can you trust all your Enforcers?'

Rylor's words were like a slap to face. A physical blow. Augustus' immediate response was an involuntary curling of the lip and the sharp acidic taste of bile.

No, Rylor should not have to ask that. No Enforcer should even have to consider it. And yet, here they were. The question was a fair if hated one.

Such times they lived in.

'I have fought and killed with these Enforcers for near a decade. I trust them implicitly.'

'I fought with Annika for nine years.' The meaning beneath that sentence hung in the silence between them. 'But we must go off the assumption that your Enforcers are loyal. Otherwise it won't matter, we're all already dead.' Rylor's voice was mechanical, made even more so by the comms reducing his accent, but Augustus sensed the pain buried beneath his words. *Nine years destroyed by a bullet*, he thought. Nevertheless, the Enforcer was functional. The pain was there but it was buried.

'Annika would not be able to confront us directly. She knows this as we do,' Rylor continued. His mind was running through the likely scenarios, estimating the outcome of each. 'There's a private military force somewhere out there but one large enough to challenge us would be difficult to hide in a city. It would have to be large, and the larger it is, the more likely discovery by the Plague.

Hiding a force strong enough to ensure victory would be impossible. And she will not settle for anything less than surety.'

Celeste signalled she was halfway done.

Rylor felt pressure begin to build. He steadied his breathing. It only partially helped. *Annika was always the superior soldier,* he told himself.

No, that was doubt speaking. It was death speaking.

Life or death, Rylor. Vengeance or the abyss. Focus. Choose.

'A private military force would likely be for security, not aggression,' he reasoned. 'Could Annika risk the Plague turning on them? She fought for her life during the initial attack as well as any of us. Something redirected the Plague during our escape but they sure as hell didn't control it.'

You're skirting the question, Rylor, he told himself. *It's hard to accept she's probably going to try and kill you again, isn't she? So what would you do, if you could guarantee all your foes in one place but could not confront them?*

And then he realised the answer.

'Sabotage,' said Augustus, as if hearing Rylor's thoughts.

'Even though we secured the building – '

'She would know our search techniques,' said Augustus. And with that Rylor confirmed what the Captain had known all along.

What had he been hoping for? Augustus asked himself.

False hope? False security?

A different answer, he told himself. *And yet here we are.*

His Enforcers were still searching the tower and had found nothing.

Augustus thought back to the first briefing he had given after Rylo's interrogation; the one the First Recon trooper himself had stumbled into: 'Annika Sanne will know what we would search for,' he had been telling the Enforcers arrayed before him, each ready to stride into the last breath of a dying planet. 'The building will not be secure. I want every floor searched and searched again for explosives or sabotage or anything that looks even remotely out of place. We must remember, the enemy understands our combat doctrine. They understand our training. They are the very epitome of it.'

Rylor had walked in at that point, and as every gaze had turned toward him, he had been living proof that Annika's incredible threat was real. *Here he is,* Augustus had thought that day. *The man who should not be.*

'Do you hear that?' said Rylor audibly.

Celeste looked up at Augustus as Rylor spoke. She said nothing, her thoughts hidden behind the shielded lenses of her helmet.

Silence.

'The fighting has stopped,' said Augustus.

'There isn't even the sound of scavengers anymore. Every planet has scavengers. Carrion birds or vermin. But here… just now, nothing. They've fled. No scavengers means one thing.'

'Plague.'

Nothing more needed to be said. Should they be caught here, inside the tower, they had their backs to the wall.

There was no other way. The mathematics of defeat: either we make our stand here, rats caught in a trap, or we attempt a fighting retreat and be cut down in the streets.

A fighting retreat, such a manoeuvre was costly. Enforcers would die. Perhaps all of them.

But a last stand was suicide.

For who were the circumstances favourable, Augustus? The Captain chastised himself.

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Gamma Prime Corporation Headquarters
Location: Gamma Tau, Surface
08:02 hours Earth equivalent

For who were the circumstances favourable, Augustus? The Captain chastised himself.

The sounds of fighting had stopped; the civilians who had made their stand now either dead or become a part of the infection that killed them.

They had done well to last as long as they did.

And now their enemies' ranks would have swelled further.

He did not have to look outside to know what he would see: Empty streets married to absolute silence. The desolation left in the wake of infection.

The calm before the storm, he thought.

Rylor's grip on his rifle was assured but gentle, like a parent holding its child.

Like the way he held his daughter.

Like the way Annika had, once.

Like the way Annika held her rifle when she had shot him.

Assured, but gentle.

He sighted down the scope, observing the deserted streets.

He breathed. He waited.

Celeste believed she could predict the near-exact outcome of any given circumstance if there was a guarantee of no outside interference with her process. She understood people. She understood thought and desire, and what could make a person do good or bad things.

And despite everything she had ever done, and everything she knew she would do, and would do it all again, she was a believer.

Celeste had once seen the impossible happen.

Such occurrences were called miracles: the laws of the universe bent and broken by one who lay outside it, like an artist working her canvas, casting brush strokes here and there, adding and subtracting, giving and taking as saw fit.

And from that celestial occurrence millennia ago, she was here and now: the numbers ran; her data-box chirped; her chest rose and fell with the breath of life… she almost prayed.

Sergeant Voya clicked the side of her mouth with her tongue. It was a bad habit and like all bad habits it died hard. She'd done it for as long as she could remember, unable to recall a time where she did not tap her tongue in a clicking noise when she needed focus. The gentle tap-tap-tap sound, felt as much as heard, helped ground her thoughts. It gave them something to concentrate on.

She was composed. Her pulse was steady; her breathing steady; her hands steady. And around this oasis of calm the other Enforcers quickly scanned the tower interior, searching for something, anything, that could have been turned into an explosive or a structural weakness.

She had left a skeleton guard at each compass point of the eighth storey, the floor that had given the best angle of aim versus cover facing the avenues that lead to the plaza.

Under the weight of her steps debris crunched and splintered from where the Plague or looters had ransacked this place. The sound of

ruin beneath her was echoed, enlarged, slowed down. Everything about her passed by in a slight haze; she was outside herself, observing, within and without, and waiting, waiting, waiting.

Tap-tap-tap went her tongue.

Physically and mentally she was at peak combat efficiency.

She welcomed this fight.

Numbers flashed on the data-box quicker than the eye could follow. Though they appeared in no logical order that the mind could understand at such speed, they implied the heavy sense of a countdown.

The transfer was almost complete. It had been nearly seven minutes since Celeste had broken the security and firewalls protecting the servers. Now every surveillance unit was being collated. Just one more minute.

Chance… luck… fortune. That many-faced quality of many names had a prodigious amount of power in all matters but especially in war, and could bring about great changes in a situation through very slight forces.

Chance could be semi-controlled and negated, twisted and manipulated. Annika's actions celebrated this, the events had that transpired on this world were evidence that Annika knew how to play the game of chance, and she played it exceptionally well. She had been manipulating chance from the start.

Their chances were slim, Celeste appreciated. But chance can never be broken. You can only see how far it will bend.

Slim? Yes. Impossible? No.

Celeste had survived slim chances before. Probability and luck, what it is to live and to die, and an Enforcer knew this more than most. She knew sooner or later, pushing the odds far enough, she was going to lose.

Her train of thought was interrupted by Voya on the public comm channel: ‘Plague approaching,’ Voya said, her slick voice low. ‘Fifty strong.’

Right on time: Celeste’s data-box chirped completion.

What were the chances?

Too many to fight, the scavengers knew it before us. Augustus began computing the most efficient course of action: the flight path retrieval would be done momentarily: Options: They wait the Plague out: Launch a surprise attack and make directly for the shuttle LZ: The southern approach was closest: Risk of detection was high.

‘How long until hostiles in range?’ he asked over the public channel.

‘They’re headed directly toward the tower. Three minutes,’ replied Voya.

‘Can we avoid them?’

‘Unlikely.’

Celeste had disconnected her data-box and stood up, secreting it away about her person. She unslung her Genling and moved rapidly toward the windows.

Augustus moved alongside her and saw the approaching horde.

‘Ninety seconds until they’re upon us,’ said Voya.

‘31, get your Enforcers to the rooftop,’ he addressed Voya. ‘All Enforcers – rooftop – now!’

The Captain whirled from the window and ran toward the stairwell. Carthor was already ahead of him, so was Rylor. The sounds of armoured boots and heavy footfalls reverberated through the stairwells; the time for discretion was past. Either the Plague already knew they were here or they would do soon, but Augustus

would not entertain the idea of open combat unless all other options were exhausted. A last stand was suicide, but a fighting retreat was not far behind. He would not condemn the men and women under his command to death unless there was no alternative. He was an Enforcer, a Captain no less, and he would find a way to survive this or he would make one.

‘Command: I want a rooftop extraction. The LZ is not secure: I repeat: This will be a hot extraction,’ he addressed his command unit.

‘Acknowledged. Shuttles en-route,’ replied the Gorgon’s Fury.

‘Stallion GF02, where is your location?’

Silence on the comm. The footfalls of the Enforcers seemed louder.

Silence.

Where is my intel shuttle! Thought Augustus, and a cold feeling began to take hold.

A sudden metallic clanging slit through his thoughts like a scalpel as Carthor kicked open the door to the rooftop ahead of him and a cold light blazed through, the Enforcer’s helmets automatically adjusting the shade levels to compensate.

Carthor and Rylor spread out across the rooftop, the First Recon making his way to the edge of the building as the other Enforcer took their positions.

Rylor looked down and in the distance below he could make out large dark swarms converging on the tower. *Plague. Looks like the capital’s not quiet any longer,* he thought.

Several streets away the smoke of the civilian’s last stand continued to drift hazily upward, indifferent to it all.

Sixty seconds later and all Enforcers were atop the tower’s roof. Voya had stationed herself and five others at the rooftop entrance and final stairwell, creating a chokepoint should any Plague make it

this far up. Karthor was there, his tri-barrel pointed down, the fearsome weapon engaged to kill whatever should emerge.

How long can we hold here? the Captain asked himself, answering immediately: *only as long as it takes the Stage Ones and Twos to arrive.*

A defensive location was now a requirement for survival: that he had called for a city centre extraction meant once the shuttles arrived their engines would bring every Plague in the city running. While they could hold off the Stage Three's indefinitely, it was the moment that the Stage Two's or Stage One's breached the stairwell the real bloodletting would begin. Such monstrosities were not easily put down. It would only take one to reach the doorway and start tearing through them and then the dam would break: the horde would spill out and consume them all here atop the tower in a flood of violence and rending and tearing of flesh.

We must hope the shuttles arrive soon, before the Plague, and be prepared to defend until that moment. How long until they breach this building? Another sixty seconds?

Still, Augustus felt he had made the correct decision, if it could be labelled such a thing, given the poor choices he had been presented. The moment any fighting began, regardless of where, would bring more Plague. At least here, at this height, they had bought time, and could hold while the shuttles landed. Better a fight here than through the lower storeys of the tower where they could be surrounded.

But had he made the correct decision coming here in the first place?

Could he not have found another way?

Such questions are for another time, he thought. *But you will be answering them with a body count,* his doubt refuted.

He quickly silenced that voice. *The danger of this place isn't the Plague! It is Annika. She is surely using the Plague as a tool. But what of her? She wanted us here! Of that I am certain.*

But why? They had found nothing to suggest sabotage, and though Annika would disguise sabotage well, could she truly hide from their inspection? For almost a fortnight he had the three squads trained in searching for the most unusual forms of sabotage and explosives that could be created. He had been as confident as could be, given the circumstances, that they had a chance of discovering her handiwork, should any exist.

But to find nothing? Nothing at all?

The only nothingness Augustus had found with any certainty was that nothing felt right about this entire situation.

And soon the Plague will be upon us.

So was it this? Was this attack Annika's grand strategy? It seemed so… lackadaisical, compared to her carefully orchestrated betrayal. A convergence of Plague gave them too much time, too much opportunity to escape.

At least, so Augustus thought.

If he was wrong, and Annika had not sabotaged this place, then he knew he had unnecessarily called every Plague in the city upon them, and surely alerted her to their presence also.

A double-bluff perhaps? Make him imagine a threat were not existed, then by his own actions he would condemn them all?

It was a deadly tactic of practised knife-fighters; feint with the blade then drop it to the other hand and strike home, as your foe parried the first attack that was no longer there.

But none of this answered where his intel shuttle had disappeared to. And that cold sensation gnawing at his gut grew larger with each passing moment. It had been too quiet, too long.

Something was very wrong here.

'Stallion GF02, I try again, where is your location?' he said.

‘It’s not coming.’

A reply.

An unexpected reply.

A voice he had never heard before. Lightly spoken. Gentle, but assured.

A woman’s voice. She had spoken on the public channel, and as he looked up, he saw Rylor facing him, frozen.

And he knew that voice was Annika.

But the distant sound of engines could be heard, and each Enforcer turned to the face the origin. Even Voya looked over her shoulder from the stairwell door.

Three – no, four – black spots appeared on the horizon, growing larger every second.

Council’s blessings, thought Augustus.

But what had Annika meant? Why now – why speak now?

He knew she attempting to get beneath his skin. *The moment you get angry, you lose,* he had been taught. *The cold thinker wins. Be like frost Augustus, be like frost.*

But, “it’s not coming?” How, or what, Annika had meant by that?

He did not know, but he would find out. They had the flight path now. They would find her.

Her words had touched him; he would admit that. Three words had cut him as sure as any blade, but pain was distant to him. He was used to it. He was unfeeling. He was frost.

But, he would return the favour, in time.

Then the explosions began, and all thought was destroyed.

The first three shuttles were simultaneously hit: three fiery streaks of light soared from nearby buildings and detonated into the shuttles. The first Stallion was struck underneath, the force flipping it over and colliding with a nearby tower, smoke billowing as it then fell, metal screaming against metal to the ground below. The second simply exploded mid-air, the resulting inferno almost blasting the third clear of the incoming warhead, but not far enough, as its tail was clipped the shuttle span violently out of control, into a second tower and out the other side and was lost to sight. A burst of flame a moment later marked the end.

A deafening howl was heard below, the Plague, ever thirsting for blood, were now most certainly aware of human presence.

The sickening truth struck home: Augustus had called his shuttles into an ambush.

And now, the trap is sprung, he thought with an appalling vindication of his earlier suspicion. His Enforcers had already taken positions across on the towers, covering the sides and the building entry, but their Genlings were out of effective range.

They couldn't fire upon their enemy.

Annika had chosen her strategy well. He saw that now. Scattering her forces across the city, not to fight, but to prevent any departure.

The Plague, it seemed, would be allowed to do its work.

But hope remained – the fourth shuttle still remained, a little ways back. The pilot flew up and over the tower tops, now wise to the gauntlet, exposing as little of itself as possible. It curved a wide berth from where the warheads had been fired, coming at the tower from a forty-five degree angle above the main thoroughfare, straightening for its pickup run.

But it was going too fast – the shuttle loomed larger – showing no intent of slowing.

'That's not one of ours,' said Rylor, sighting down his scope.

Augustus thought: *of course it isn't.*

The shuttle was in plain sight now; a military shuttle, its hull jet black, without markings or insignia. A second later dark shapes began to emerge from its hull as it unloaded whatever cargo it was carrying.

'Fire!' screamed Augustus, but he didn't have to. The Enforcers had already begun lighting the morning sky with crimson laser, streaking through the air toward the shuttle. Several hit but damage was minimal, and above them the cargo was released.

Oblong black shapes fell to the ground around them, then struck the tower.

Augustus waited for the detonations.

A body landed in front of him – corpses scattered across the rooftop – the weight and velocity producing a sickening crunch as flesh hit metal and concrete and gave way to the impact. His boots were smeared with blood and bile expunged from the tangled mess of tissue and bone in front of him.

Bodies? Corpses?

What the hell is going on? thought Augustus.

The enemy shuttle continued on, curving back over the fresh graves of the Enforcer's own shuttles, landing atop one of the towers a missile had fired from.

Rylor pointed at the streets below, and where the corpses had landed, the Plague was tearing amok them from every direction. Swarms of black were pouring from streets and doorways, converging on the trail of the twisted bombing run.

'If they weren't dead when they fell from the shuttle, and if they weren't dead when they hit the ground, well, they're definitely dead now' said Voya, breaking the silence among them as she placed one foot on the tower's rim, peering over the edge.

The Plague were tearing through the corpses.

Bodies? Is that really it – that's how they're directing the Plague? Augustus thought. *So simple, so obtuse.*

Rylor looked across the rooftop at the scene: crimson fluid filled his vision, a nightmarish depiction of the reality that war is hell. But this wasn't a nightmare. This was real, and this was happening. In that moment, he felt the last love he felt for Annika die, that she could be party to something so vile. He saw sizes of bodies that made him think of – and he couldn't even finish the thought.

Numbness washed over him, though he had not known these victims, they wore the faces of his own.

'Here they come!' said Voya. 'They're entering the tower!'

'All Enforcers prepare for engagement. Take positions and pick your targets. Upon my command, fire,' Augustus said as he strode to the doorway. 'It seems we are forced to fight our way out.'

Karthor gripped his tri-barrel tighter; tap-tap-tap went Voya's tongue; Celeste whetted her lips, entering the trance of battle, as each Enforcers inhibitions loosed and the battle adrenaline began to take hold.

Rylor's legs gave way beneath him.

The tower shook, then shuddered, and a final explosion was heard –

Celeste was the first to realize it. It's what she would have done. Augustus' realisation was only an instant behind, as he thought, with a emotionless respect: *this is the coup de grâce.*

The tower buckled and lurched as the lower floors were immersed in the fire of explosions, a chain reaction working its way up through the metal and concrete beneath them, supports shattered, as the tower fell –

The horde below –

Annika… she had trapped the tower after all, was Augustus' last conscious thought.

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Gamma Prime Corporation Headquarters
Location: Gamma Tau, Surface
08:06 hours Earth equivalent

The Corporation Headquarters buckled and swayed as the lower floors were immersed in the conflagration of explosions, a chain reaction working its way up through the metal and concrete beneath them, the supports shattering, the tower falling –

The horde below –

Annika… she had trapped the tower after all, was Augustus' last conscious thought.

The center of gravity collapsed, dragging the structure with it, the violent scream of twisted metal lost within the cacophony.

Augustus' footing gave way as the tower lurched – the city streets rose toward him –

Instinct took hold. Reason was suspended and adrenaline flowed.

The tower fell, the ground emerging at an ever-increasing angle. Training became nature and was performed without conscious thought.

The roof buckled and broke; Augustus ran, lifting his rifle and engaging his jump-pack, its thrust and the angle of descent taking him clear of the collapsing structure and above the swarming Plague below, firing as he went, a meteor ablaze, soaring from the chaos.

Harnessing the weight of his armored form and the force of his descent he landed atop an infected and drove the heel of his boot into the creature's skull which crumpled like red, sodden paper.

Firing in an arc around him, another Plague rushed him from his right as he lit his molecular blade and punched clean through the misshapen torso. He pulled back and took the head off another with the reverse swing.

They were barely recognizable as human.

The unmistakable crimson of a Genling laser took the rushing Plague from his left, as other Enforcers landed akin to him, activating their jump-packs and clearing the tower's ground zero. With a bloody blade and searing laser they forced a foothold in the street, but their numbers were few. Augustus looked up and saw other Enforcers rising in all directions, like shrapnel from a grenade, those unable to get a clear footing being flung from the tower as it crashed to the planet's surface. He saw one spiral into a nearby structure and the light of laser fire flash in the windows. Others were crushed and lost to sight as the roiling wave of dust and debris took them.

'We've been herded into a slaughterhouse,' said one gritted voice over comms.

The Enforcers formed up into a semi-circle and began forcing their way down the street, their lenses compensating for the low visibility in the aftermath of the destruction. Voya was there, and Kallon's bulk was distinctive.

Celeste, he thought. Rylor?

No time to dwell.

Another Enforcer landed next to him: Celeste struck the ground in a three-point landing, her weapon ready. There was already blood on her armor. She took to the front, firing into the upper windows of the surrounding structures.

'Rylor Ings – where is he?' said Augustus over comms.

'I was with him when he fell – he was struck and flung from the tower,' replied Celeste.

‘Dead?’

‘Probably.’

But we have what we need, thought Augustus. He surveyed the situation.

‘Annika knows exactly what we’re going to do. So we’re not going to disappoint,’ the Captain relayed on the public comms, knowing Annika could probably hear him. ‘We have no other way out. Murder anything that gets in your way. Make the Devil of old Earth sit up in horror. Make Annika sick to witness this. Our fury is unleashed! Move!’

The Enforcers advanced as a cohesive yet fluid whole, those rushing forward covered by those firing behind, before taking cover and firing themselves, allowing those behind to overtake; in this way each Enforcer overlapped without a break in their assault.

Escaping the plaza, they turned into a closer-knitted street, blocked with debris.

‘Clear the windows! Clear the doors!’

No sooner had this been said than a Plague launched from a second-story window and landed atop an Enforcer, the muzzle of its gun finding purchase in the neck joint and firing full auto as the body beneath it convulsed in its armor. A sweep of a Genling cleaved it apart, but another quickly took its place.

‘Forward! Forward!’

Augustus knew one thing with certainty: if they were caught in a protracted engagement here, they would die.

They had to keep moving.

He opened a comm channel to the Gorgon’s fury as he ran, the pounding of his boots echoing the rhythm of blood in his ears.

‘I need a secondary extraction, point Delta. Primary extraction failed, I repeat, primary extraction failed.’

‘Acknowledged.’

Hearing the howls from behind he cut the channel. Augustus turned and blew a hole through one creatures leg, toppling it to the ground and kicking it away, feeling its bones break. He struck another with his blade, the singing whistle of it slicing through the neck and chest cavity.

But for every Plague they ended, more appeared.

‘Grenades! Cover!’

He flung the explosive as did the others, able and knelt behind a fallen section of rubble blackened by fire and smoke. Hearing the cascading blasts, he leaped up and vaulted the half-wall into the smoking basin, the force of the detonations punching a hole in the onrushing Plague.

Like a spearhead the Enforcers thrust through, firing in a three hundred and sixty degree arc all around them.

But the Plague attacked from all sides, ever more emerging.

Augustus thought: *We are surrounded. He looked back and saw other Enforcers still trying to fight through, denied passage by the Plague. He thought he saw a familiar lightness of armor among those behind, but dismissed the possibility as he witnessed another Enforcer before him being dragged down by several Plague and saw viscous blades being hacked into the armor joints, before delivering a death blow.*

‘Kallon! Clear a way!’ he bellowed.

Kallon ran forward, his heavy footfalls shaking up lose dirt and gravel, striding atop an abandoned vehicle which buckled and bent beneath his weight. He loosened his Tri-barrel, swung it into his grip and pressed the trigger.

The result was carnage.

The machine was an instrument of death the likes of which, once

made, changed the nature of warfare: its three barrels span with a force that was only bested by the devastating lasers they produced, three streaks of super-heated crimson struck the onrushing Plague and devoured them. Kallon span the weapon, its arc cleaving entire sections of organic matter apart in the blink of an eye. That a man could wield such power was fearful, as flesh and bone were simply incinerated where it struck, and where the lasers carved through the ranks of the infected they pounded into the concrete and metal of the surrounding structures leaving a trail of smoldering black and ruined flesh as evidence of the weapon's journey.

'Forward!' Augustus bellowed.

The Enforcers rushed into the clearing where the Tri-barrel had unloaded. Kallon was still atop the vehicle, a man possessed, as he turned the weapon up to the windows of the higher stories, the pitched whining of the specialized Genling keening through the sounds of combat. The heat of the lasers could be felt as the air became charged with energy, the Enforcers' rifles joining in the lethal chorus. Glass shattered and bodies fell as the Enforcers pushed onward beneath the storm of the Tri-barrel. The Plague were attacking still, giving no thought to their own lives, concentrating on Kallon; their small-arms fire ricocheted off his armor before he drew sight upon each in turn.

Kallon jumped down, his weapon needing time to recharge, and rushed to catch up.

A spark of hope began to emerge in Augustus as they turned toward another boulevard and saw the edge of the city approaching. They ran still, never slowing, the Enforcer in front of him being caught by the blast of a Plague's grenade and losing a limb, the crimson spray of it flung across Augustus' armor. Celeste grabbed the falling Enforcer without breaking stride, lifting the wounded up and dragging them to their feet along with her.

And then the Captain saw it, standing in the middle of the boulevard: a hulking behemoth form twice the size of a man, twisted and malformed beyond all recognition of its original species.

He had seen such a thing only once before.

It caught sight of them, hungry, yellow eyes leering from its skull-like visage, the flesh tightly pulled back like some demonic humanoid pit-bull. Bones protruded from beneath its flesh, the warped skeleton forming a disturbing natural armor that protected the taught layers of inhuman sinew and muscle that rippled with devastating might.

A Plague Stage One.

Patient Zero.

The hulking beast approached them slowly, its nightmarish shadow lengthening to meet them as the sun rose behind the once-human creature.

Above the Stage One crawled those it had infected in turn, the Stage Two's. Their elongated limbs and raking claws gave them purchase along the high walls of the surrounding buildings, and like their sire, their bone and matter had been reshaped into something more befitting the terrible infection: teeth had become great fangs, their shoulders hunched and neck sunken, and they moved with an unnatural gait that could quickly become a bounding gallop to engage their foe.

Augustus quickly scanned his surroundings. *We are caught here, he realized. To flee was suicide, the Stage Twos were far faster. And behind, he could hear the sounds of Genling fire attempting to keep the horde back.*

'Kallon, fire as I do, target the Stage One – the Two's will move too fast for the Tri-barrel,' he said over comms. 'The rest of you – pick a target and fire until it stops moving. Keep them at a distance, we can't run, but the Stage Two's won't assault headlong into a Genling. And never, ever, turn your back on one, even to engage another. They're too quick. Watch for all limbs, the legs are just as deadly as the claws. Sever them.' The Captain's voice was grim. 'If you're grappled, pull a grenade, you're already dead.'

The Stage One and its brethren were sizing them up, taking stock of

the threat the survivors posed. The Plague's greatest weapon had no rush to engage, its cunning recognizing the rock and the hard place the Enforcers were caught between.

Caught between the hammer and the anvil, thought Augustus. And no way back.

The Stage One advanced toward them as the horde of Stage Three's continued to press from behind.

Strewn across the street, the Enforcers prepared themselves and took cover where they could find it; in doorways, behind ruined sections of wall, the ground floors of stores and workplaces now unrecognizable in their function. Bullets ricocheted and splintered around them, ever kicking up more plumes of dust as the continuous fire of the horde grew in volume and lethality as they sensed the Enforcers trapped, and pressed in.

Augustus leant against the frame of the doorway he had taken cover in and sighted down his scope. He knew once they began firing, the Stage One would rush them.

'On my shot,' he said over comms.

He steadied his aim, picked his target, and pulled the trigger: the legs of the Patient Zero where the bone growth wasn't as thick. As the too-bright crimson of his laser seared the mutated limb, the familiar whine of the Tri-barrel started up and the Enforcers, back to back between the horde and the Stage One and Twos, unleashed their last strength.

Fire was exchanged from both sides as bodies, human and Plague, fell in devastating number.

The street was a no-man's land.

The Stage One howled as it was struck, a deafening bellow that reverberated through the streets. It ducked its head and charged, weathering a storm of fire which would have felled any other life form as the Tri-barrel pounded into it and Augustus held down his trigger. The Stage Two's, hearing their masters call, dived into a

gallop along the walls. They leapt and vaulted from the street and buildings, bounding from their perches in a sickening rendition of a graceful hunter as laser fire streaked all around them.

Behind, the horde of Stage Three's pressed closer, buoyed by the echo of the Stage One's war cry, their small-arms fire now posing a true threat as the sheer amount of it could begin to take toll on their almost stationery targets. Yet the Enforcers superior skill and accuracy was still holding back the tide of Plague, albeit barely, as heads and limbs were removed when the Stage Threes left cover.

Augustus witnessed a grenade land directly behind a burnt-out shell of a vehicle where Voya was firing from; the sergeant grabbed it and attempted to hurl it back but no sooner had it left her hand than it exploded. She went down, her armor blackened, clutching a bloody stump of a wrist where a hand had once been.

We who were living are now dying, with a little patience, thought Augustus.

The Enforcers disciplined fire – picking their targets and killing with each shot – was holding both fronts of Plague from outright rushing them, but the Stage Two's were greatly pressing their advantage of superhuman agility, moving between broken buildings like wraiths across the battlefield, showing less and less of themselves as they advanced. Kallon, back against the wall, was firing as he could at the Stage One, forcing it too, to dart between cover.

We can't hold, thought Augustus.

He saw more Stage Threes fall, for the closer they pressed the more lethal the Enforcers proved, but while the Plague's numbers had finally begun to thin the horde, they were almost on them.

The Enforcers were shouting into their comms, warning moment to moment of the direst threat, directing fire to where it was most needed.

'Kill 'em! Kill 'em!' someone cried.

‘Keep it efficient,’ Celeste rebuked through gritted teeth.

The first Stage Two vaulted its cover to the closest Enforcer and took a Genling shot full-frontal, its cranium exploding in a blender of crimson fluids and solids. Its body shuddered as it toppled over, an Enforcer twisting away to prevent from being crushed. A second Stage Two took advantage of its brethren’s demise to dash into the gap in the defense, leaping toward the same Enforcer and landing atop them. Cries of pain and rage could be heard and Augustus witnessed the Enforcer fire into the creatures gut point-blank, but too late – the Enforcer was torn apart in a matter of seconds and the Stage Two dived away.

Augustus was still hunting the Stage One, daring it to emerge.

A scream of defiance across the street took his momentary attention as he saw the Enforcer Shiqar pulled into the darkness of a building, a Stage Two dragging him. Silhouetted still-frames of a duel for life and death could be seen with each shot fired from within, but all too quickly the light died and Shiqar’s voice was no longer heard.

The Stage One moved and Augustus fired, striking its shoulder as it moved into another structure. Its cunning knew how to best avoid his direct angle of fire while Kallon had to allow the Tri-barrel to recharge. The ground reverberated as seconds later the Stage One leapt into the street, now mere meters distant, swiping at a burnt-out shell of a vehicle and sending it flying, forcing two Enforcers to dive out of its way. It picked up the nearest Enforcer from the floor and ripped them in two, casting the halves aside, roaring in its joy of violence and bloodlust.

As the line of defense was again breached, the Stage Two’s began their final assault, launching themselves at the Enforcers with reckless abandon.

The disciplined fire of the Enforcers became a melee as they all fought for their lives. Laser fire was exchanged point-blank into tangled masses of flesh as the Stage Twos leapt at those still standing. Grenades were rammed into the open jaws of some while the hiss of molecular blades sang through the air as they were unsheathed; Augustus saw Celeste drive hers through the skull of

one whilst firing her pistol into those still oncoming.

A blast to the right forced Augustus against the wall, as one mortally wounded Enforcer held onto his assailant and drew the cap from his grenade, taking the Stage Two with him.

Kallon had turned his fire upon the horde, trying to keep it back, unable to target the Stage One as it fought three Enforcers hacking and firing into it.

Augustus left his cover and threw himself into the breach, striking a Stage Two with his rifle before turning the barrel on it and firing. The Stage One, bodies strewn around it, rushed into the midst of more Enforcers, picking up another and impaling them upon a loose piece of rebar, even as the others fired their Genlings directly into its body.

It was butchery.

The horde pressed closer, sensing victory almost at hand.

Suddenly several Stage Two's fell while others screamed in agony as a series of fatally accurate shots struck them from the side of the street, their flesh erupting as bullets tore through them, caught entirely off guard.

Rylor, his light armor bloody and his flesh bruised, rushed the melee from where Shiqar had fallen, firing as he did so.

Augustus had heard the skill of First Recon, and he had witnessed their practices on holo-tape, but never before had he seen the lethal expertise up close: Rylor dived into the combat, taking no cover. He lunged at the nearest Stage Two, punching his blade clean through its malformed face. He wasn't so much fast as deadly accurate; despite the blood and death around him Rylor fought like he was in the practice range, every shot and swipe hitting home, turning from target to target and laying low each assailant in turn. Augustus saw a Plague rush him only to be cleaved neck to sternum as Rylor swung his molecular blade and continued firing one handed, before bringing the rifle back around to his grip in one smooth motion, killing another with his ceaseless shooting. Rylor ducked a clumsy

swipe and stabbed another Plague in the neck as he took a third's legs out from under it on the reverse swing. He stomped into its chest, ending its tortured existence as its ribcage and organs shattered.

The Stage Two's were fast, their bodies twisted into a form fit for brutality, but they lacked the skill of combat. In comparison, Rylor Ings was a harmony of grace and rage with a talent for murder.

Caught without cover between the assault of Rylor and the crossfire of the Enforcers, the Stage Two's were cut apart: Where moments before they had been atop the Enforcers, now there were more Stage Two bodies than living.

But despite the momentary respite, the Plague pressed: Rylor was weathering fire from the horde but remained cool-headed, in the face of death his aim did not waver nor did his grip loosen, and so he continued to find in his crosshairs each and every target he sought.

He was saying something, Augustus could hear, uttering some kind of mantra to himself.

A series of shrieks were loosed as the horde, fueled by bloodlust and the prospect of impending death, finally broke cover and rushed the Enforcers. They drew savage-looking blades and expended their ammunition in a frenzy. Two more Enforcers fell to the volley and Augustus saw Celeste drag a bleeding soldier behind a broken wall, firing with her pistol. Rylor had moved to cover now, expelled a spent clip and inserted another, continuing his relentless assault, gunning for the Stage One. While other Enforcers had not risked hitting their own in the on-going melee, Rylor's shots found the creature's mutilated skull where its face should have been, cutting into the flesh and bone. It brought one hand up to stop the assault, and, screaming in pain, charged him.

Rylor stepped aside and weaved into the open street, using his preternatural dexterity to his advantage. He drew his pistol as he relit his molecular blade and slung his rifle across his back. The Stage One, driven by pain and primal fury attacked blindly. Rylor twisted beneath its clumsy swipe to slice his blade across the Stage

One's heel, severing the sinew and muscle, it shook with pain but no sooner had Rylor cut one ankle than he did the other, drawing the blade up through the leg and stabbing into the creature's knee from behind: the ice-blue of the blade pierced through to the other side, expelling a shower of crimson as it did so, crippling the joint.

The Stage One cried out and fell to its singular working knee but caught Rylor with a powerful swinging back hand, the force sending him flying into a wall where a jutting piece of metal impaled him through his gut.

His body shuddered as he pushed himself off and slumped to the floor, unmoving. The broken rebar dripped crimson onto him.

Augustus turned his attention from the growing piles of Stage Three corpses at his feet, the horde throwing their last strength at the Enforcers. The Stage One was approaching Rylor's still form, dragging its now useless leg.

He saw where Rylor had wounded the Stage One and fired.

Patient Zero howled again, the sound cascading through the streets. The remaining Stage Two's rushed to their sire's plight, withdrawing from cover and attacking anew. One rushed Augustus and he swiftly cut it down, but the Stage One bent over Rylor and picked him up by his throat.

Augustus couldn't reach him.

Rylor, half conscious, felt too-large fingers crushing his larynx, starving his lungs of air. His sight was blurred as his eyes rolled, and he could smell fetid breath as something roared into his face, covering him in spittle.

Rylor knew he was dying, again.

With his last ravenous breaths he tried to regain composure, focusing his sight and saw into the depths of the Stage One's eyes. His gaze pierced the veil between them, and the creature gazed back; two hunters locked in a struggle of life and death, and neither saw any shred of mercy or humanity. Whoever this had been,

whatever it was now, those eyes encapsulated everything: One saw a twisted infection, a ceaseless hunger, inhuman irises black and streaked with toxic yellow – this was a thing of nightmares, and as the jaws opened a second time, rows of teeth grinned with a malevolent joy in suffering. The second saw a prey, its life fragile and weak, its flesh soft and broken, alone and helpless, ready to become something more; to evolve, to understand, to become kin.

Rylor imagined he felt a couple of tugs at his side, the way his child would when he was home and she wanted him to follow somewhere, her little hands unable to reach any higher than his thigh.

He would never see her again.

An acquainted but not often heard blast rang out.

The Stage One's grip around his neck slipped and the world turned on its axis as gravity drew him low again. He hit the floor. The Stage One crashed to the ground twitching, the lower part of its head and jaw missing, the upper part of its torso seared black. It was unable to even scream.

From his vantage on the floor Rylor saw Celeste click open the sawn-off shotgun she had taken from his thigh holster and load two more shells, the metallic casings catching the morning sunlight. She pressed the barrels into the gaping wound and fired again: the Stage One's skull exploded into a fine spray of powdered bone and pink mist. Its whole body shook for a moment while gouts of scarlet blood expelled from its neck.

The twitching ceased; the blood flow slowed into a seeping, thick pool.

Celeste stood over Rylor and grabbed his forearm.

'Get up!'

The Enforcers were falling back toward the edge of the city still, the horde harrying them as the Stage Two's continued to pick them off from the ruins of the city.

Rylor holstered the shotgun and grabbed his rifle, stumbling to his feet and breaking into a run, firing again. He could feel his gut bleeding profusely where the broken metal had punched through his armor. His head swam and his body ached as his bruised throat drew breath, his armor flooding his body with adrenaline and stimulants to keep him conscious, even as he knew with every step his wound grew worse.

All thought had gone. His mind had become that perfect white where actions are performed without conscious awareness. His rifle found its targets of its own accord and pulled its own trigger; he was merely the vessel through which it operated.

He ran through the city's outer streets, the Enforcers firing around him, seeing those he knew and those he did not battle for life and death around him.

And running, running, running.

He had no words to describe.

It was here, at this point, everything made sense; the fields of Elysium, the hunting grounds, Valhalla; the endless battles of warrior mythologies wherein Heaven was the unending battle-high.

Tethering on the edge, Rylor had been here before. Only those who know where and what the edge was had gone over it, never to return. Rylor fell into that white abyss.

His lips moved of their own accord, uttering something he couldn't remember.

The ground beneath Augustus' feet went from hard to soft as color bled back into his vision, his boots pounding through the turf of green fields as Gamma Tau's plains rolled before them, rising into a distant forest.

Augustus reopened the comm channel to the Gorgon's fury.

'Approaching destination, compass point four-two-seven-one. Fire

on my command.'

'Acknowledged, firing hot.'

Augustus waited until he received confirmation the target lock was acquired, then uttered one word: 'Fire.'

Several miles above, circling Gamma Tau in low orbit, the Gorgon's Fury turned its weapon batteries planet-side. The cannons punched back into the vessel as they fired their payload, white-hot artillery shells screaming through the planet's atmosphere like falling stars.

On the ground, running through the fields as the city fell away behind them, a great inferno erupted around the Enforcers: the shells of the Gorgon's Fury struck their flanks and rear in a V-formation as the survivors fled, led by Augustus, into the single opening the wall of fire permitted. Deafening explosions threw showers of earth and dust and dirt over them, as their lenses worked to compensate against the debris and fire.

Plague bodies were incinerated and limbs flung as the pursuing horde was caught in the orbital bombardment. Scores were killed with every shell as a hellfire of detonations engulfed the pursuing horde and Stage Twos as their very flesh was ripped from their bones and bones from their bodies.

In a matter of moments, out in the open where the Enforcers could bring their superior firepower to bear without fear of collapsing structures and aim truly, the horde was broken. Howls and shrieks went up as the Plague sought refuge in the broken shell of the city, unable to pursue through the fire and flame falling from the sky.

The Enforcers ran on, the ground reverberating through them as the rain of artillery continued to fall. Two more stars fell toward them, growing larger, as the shuttles landed.

***

Forty-seven miles from Gamma Prime.
Location: Gamma Tau, two miles above surface.
17:32 hours Earth equivalent

Three shuttles had been needed to take the Enforcers to Gamma Tau.

Barely two were required to bring them home.

So few had survived. Of the twenty-one Enforcers deployed to Gamma Tau, eleven returned. Nine had escaped to the shuttles. Two more had managed to stay alive long enough to make their way to the surrounding wilderness and were found by their armor signals.

Of those total eleven, five had sustained life-threatening injuries. As well as suffering numerous wounds and losing blood, two Enforcers had lost arms, Voya her hand, and Rarkov had the left side of his face carved open. Rylor had suffered a puncture wound so deep he had collapsed on the return shuttle and needed emergency treatment.

Still, each had survived, the miracles of bionics and medicine grafting new limbs, skin and organs which were healed in a matter of hours.

Eight hours later, as the sun was beginning to set across the alien world, the Enforcers deployed again.

***

Gripping the shuttle's interior handle, Celeste let one hand go of the railing above her and leant out of the side-door. Immediately she felt the rush of wind against her skin. She drank in the sensation. The wind stung her eyes, but she refused to close them. Fields bled into forests which bled into mountains that rolled away beneath.

The shuttle cruised to its destination, an outlying research center that, confirmed with Command, was not present on any official documentation relating to Gamma Tau. This was where Annika's shuttle had flown to, and the reconnaissance performed during the Enforcers eight-hour recovery had shown signs of movement and activity.

The pilot's voice crackled into life, relaying the familiar update.

‘Drop ETA 3 minutes.’

Celeste glanced back at the shuttle following them, then pulled herself back inside and slammed the door closed. She pulled her helmet on, the blackened lenses lighting blue.

Sitting down opposite Voya, Celeste watched the sergeant still testing her new mechanical hand, grafted to replace the one she had lost in Gamma Prime. The movement of the fingers was flawless.

Voya curled it into a fist. Celeste appreciated the sergeant’s candor.

They had all lost something.

More Enforcers were now stationed in orbit, deploying to the rest of Gamma Tau, securing any remaining locations of import and combatting the Plague where needed. Soon the world would be left to the dark reaches of space, become another black strikeout in the lost pages of hidden history. What had happened here would never be known.

But first, the Artefact remained. And there was still the matter of Annika Sanne.

The reinforcements had offered to aid them in the assault on the research facility, Augustus having liaised with their officers upon arrival, but the Captain had denied each of them, preferring to trust his own in this final matter.

Several trails of black smoke billowed upward, coalescing into one large, ominous sign of destruction: the top-side of the research center had been laid to waste, the artillery batteries of the Gorgon’s Fury demolishing any surface defenses. A fire raged through the rubble and ruin as figures scrambled for cover.

As the two shuttles flew over, the Enforcers dropped out of the sky.

Celeste stepped out of the shuttle into nothingness, feeling free in that moment as the sky above receded and the ground had yet to emerge. She closed her eyes and savored the joy of falling. She

closed her eyes and allowed herself to simply… feel.

Weightless. Liberated.

And for a moment, a brief, beautiful moment, she lost herself. Sometimes she dreamt she was falling, and it was not a bad dream.

She opened her eyes: they had hardened into those of a predator. Gazing from above the smoldering ruins, her lenses locked onto the various movements beneath. Several meters from the planet surface she activated her jump-pack, the thrust slowing her descent into a controlled landing that struck the ground with the force to leave a crater, shattering the concrete. Her armor's power-assisted joints absorbed the recoil, and as she stood upright, she knew the effect an Enforcers appearance had.

The private military Rylor had spoken of were here: black-clad soldiers, weapons trained on the Enforcers, some retreating to the underground entrance, others finding cover where they could. Their aim was true, their hands steady, but their trigger fingers were still. Witnessing a being one-and-half times their size crash to the earth through smoke and fire, only to see this shadow of an armored being arise from its impact crater, had stirred the nauseous feelings of terror. Celeste looked to each of them in turn, aware of their realization that judgement had come in the form of a white-and-black humanoid wrecking ball.

Specifically designed to strike fear in those who saw it, the Enforcers appearance was an intimidating portrayal of callous indifference and absolute authority: The form-fitting armor, sleek and commanding, dwarfed the average-sized human and exerted its force in every powerful movement. The helms sharp features were dominated by emotionless ice-blue eye-lenses that contained no mercy, and to non-Enforcers, it was hard to imagine anything human could exist behind those eyes.

And it was these eyes that the black-clad soldiers saw gazing at them through air thick with smoke, the glow lighting up the ridges of Celeste's helmet, casting an impassive face that ghosted from the darkness.

The shadowy colossus moved, and the military began firing.

It was too late.

Minutes later, the eleven Enforcers walked through the surface ruin, executing any soldiers that had survived the initial onslaught.

It had been a massacre. Fighting the Plague was one thing, the infection posing a danger to the Enforcers through a combustible combination of lack of self-preservation and brute strength fueled by a viscous temperament, but sentient soldiers were akin to target practice. Conventional weapons posed little threat against Enforcers, their armor only breached by pin-point accuracy, explosives, or sheer force, and few had the nerve or ability to perform such acts upon the receiving end of an Enforcer's murderous efficiency.

'How many?' asked Augustus.

'I count twenty-six,' said Celeste.

'There's two more over here', Kallon called from behind a broken wall. Genling fire was heard. 'Three more.'

'Twenty-nine, then,' Augustus said. 'No casualties?'

'None,' said Celeste.

'Breach that door.' The Captain motioned to the large steel entrance cut at a recess to the underground facility and began walking toward it. Several Enforcers had already moved to the sides, taking breaching positions, as one hacked the keypad with a data-box unit.

Celeste approached Rylor as he stood staring at the surrounding bodies.

'What are the numbers you say when you fight?' Celeste asked him. 'Numerous times I've heard you muttering under your breath. Are you counting ammo or counting kills?'

'You mean the rhyme? One-two, buckle my shoe, three-four, knock

on the door?' Rylor replied, turning to face her.

'I don't know. I couldn't quite make it out, but that sounds like it.'

'It's a nursery rhyme my grandmother used to say to me. It's one I sang to my daughter, too.'

'You say the nursery rhyme you sing to your daughter, while you're fighting?' Celeste said, her surprise evident. Parenthood and war was an alien amalgamation to her.

Rylor seemed perplexed by her response, then shrugged.

'It helps me focus. It reminds me what I'm doing this for. Every time. Every battle. One-two, buckle my shoe, three-four, knock on the door, five-six, pick-up sticks, seven-eight, lay them straight. I can never remember the rest. It goes up to twenty, I think. So I just start over.'

Celeste looked at Rylor, an incredulous look hidden behind her helmet. She'd realized she knew everything about him there was to know military wise, but that she knew little of the person.

She was an Enforcer. Her service was a part of her, it defined who she was, and what she strived for. But Rylor, she quickly comprehended, he was an Enforcer, First Recon no less, who had an entire persona, an entire life, outside of the military.

'How does that rhyme go again, seven-eight, lay them straight? Well, you certainly laid them out straight,' said Celeste, gesturing to the bodies before them.

Rylor's aim had been pinpoint; four assailants lay before him, fallen in a straight line. 'Gives your rhyme a kind of sinister feel, doesn't it?' She said. 'Three-four, knock on the door? Guess they're knocking on death's door now.' She nudged one with her boot.

'I've never thought of it like that. Enforcer's aren't known for subtlety right? Isn't that what you once said? Well, that was almost poetic.'

One the Enforcers called out; they had breached the door. Rylor began walking to the underground facility, his rifle christened Nemesis casually resting in his arms.

The underground facility was standard Corporation function-over-form. Overhead ceaseless and seamless white lights lit the white-wall corridors as large black numbers painted beside the various doorways and viewports designated the rooms: 'surgery,' 'observation room four,' 'testing facility one', and on the numbers went. Inside these rooms were various Plague in different stages of decomposition, their biological functions and the results of various obscene tests scattered about the walls.

The Enforcers made no effort to hide their presence now, killing without hesitation any of the remaining soldiers who had sought to make a last stand in the doorways and rooms. One had attempted to surrender and received a headshot. The black-clad military were cut down to a man.

Word from the Gorgon's Fury informed Augustus that an all-black shuttle had attempted to leave the facility and had been destroyed.

'Slow, it seems, they are to realize that their fate is sealed,' mused Celeste out loud, as Augustus relayed the news. 'Or perhaps they are just loyal to the end.'

Augustus knew nothing could bring them back the Enforcers he had lost on Gamma Tau, but vengeance was cathartic, for the body count of the black-clad soldiers now totaled forty one, the white walls of the corridors indiscriminately colored blood-red where the Enforcers passed.

Augustus thought: *In Gamma Prime they had the advantage of distance and surprise, but now we fight on our terms.*

No sooner had he thought this than Rarkov turned a corner and a bullet struck him squarely in the forehead, blowing a red mist out the back of his helmet.

A second shot struck Kallon also in the corridor, the force dropping him as his shoulder was ruined.

‘Sniper!’ he screamed.

A third shot hit Kallon in the leg as he sought to crawl out of the killbox, the corridor providing no cover against such precision. A fourth shot took his other leg.

The Enforcers formed up against the corridor wall, as Kallon slowly tried to drag himself with his one good arm.

‘Stay down!’ shouted Augustus, understanding that the sniper was purposely not killing Kallon in an attempt to draw out others to aid him.

Kallon collapsed to the floor, his form barely moving.

Rylor ran to the edge of the corner where the corridor began, pushing past Augustus. He slowly knelt and leaned his rifle out of cover as another shot pierced through the scope where he had been about to place his eye.

‘For the love of the gods that once were, let them pass. You can’t kill them all, and I am loathe to delay any longer. Captain, you and your men may enter my chambers, and let us settle this. I say again: stand down,’ said an androgynous voice over the internal speakers.

Rarkov’s helm faced toward the ceiling, witness to something no living being could see. Augustus held up a fist to signal that no one was to move, and beckoned Kallon. The bloodied Enforcer crawled to the edge of the corridor and was pulled around the corner, as one of the medics immediately began treating his wounds.

No more shots were fired.

Rylor stepped back and inspected where Kallon’s armor had been breached and saw familiar entry and exit points, the same his own armor-piercing rounds left.

Ballistic weaponry of that caliber was highly specialized and extremely rare.

The sniper was using a First Recon weapon.

Annika.

Sergeant Voya kicked down the door and led her breach team into a sizeable set of personal chambers. In the middle sat a male figure behind a large, curving oak desk, clearly imported from off-world. To the left of the desk stood a woman, dressed in black military fatigues.

Two Enforcers immediately restrained the male and female, searching for weapons. Voya and three others tore the room apart, looking for anything that could pose a threat. After several heartbeats and the sound of several things breaking, Voya turned to the doorway and nodded to Augustus.

The Captain, flanked by Celeste and Rylor, entered the room proper. The remaining two Enforcers stationed themselves outside.

Like being taken to another world, the chambers felt removed from the rest of the facility. The cold clinical aesthetic of the installation ended dead at the doorway as Augustus' armored boot was immersed in thick, crimson carpet. Various art hung on the walls beneath the light of a chandelier, and a raised single bed in the corner was carved from a rich, dark wood.

However, a closer inspection revealed that despite the seeming comfort and grandeur of the room it harbored a restlessness that permeated everything, despite being torn apart by the Enforcers search, akin to the rest of the facility. Cabinets, drawers and storage units had been left open; multiple reports and documents with notes scrawled lay scattered about; several days' worth of discarded food and drink had begun to rot; the bed was not slept in.

Augustus gestured and the two Enforcers restraining the male and female occupants released them, took a step back and raised their weapons, prepared to fire should they perceive any threat of aggression from their captives.

Face to face, Augustus studied the persons before him.

The ones who had eluded him.

The ones who had caused the deaths of fourteen Enforcers.

The male befit the state of the chamber: tall and gaunt, with dark rings around his eyes, the result of sleepless nights. Several days growth of stubble shaded his features. His short black hair was swept aside in a poor effort to tame it.

There was no mistaking the woman: Piercing eyes, resembling steel in both hardness and color coolly regarded the Enforcers beneath roughly cropped dark hair, and a thin mouth and soft features that had an almost noble demeanor showed no fear. Her face was unforgettable; all the Enforcers present knew her for the Captain had made sure she was to be recognized immediately on sight.

Annika Sanne.

As he entered the room and saw her, time slowed for Rylor. Not only did he recognize the woman, but he recognized the male, too, sitting behind the desk.

Rylor thought: *how could such a thing be?*
But his eyes he could not tear from Annika.

As if he was thrashing underwater, the sound and pressure of the blood in his ears rose to the crescendo of the crashing waves a drowning man is pulled beneath; the relentless force, the fear and the struggle, then absolute black and complete silence as the fall began; the light above fading further and further; eyes lose focus; heart and lungs give out; the realization smothered by darkness: *I am alone.*

An encroaching obscurity of the edge of his vision blurred his sight and the shadows cast within the chamber grew toward him, elongated wretched black claws that grasped for his mind. No longer Rylor saw the room around him, no longer he felt the reassuring weight of his armor. He couldn't taste and he couldn't hear. All he could do was breathe, and see.

He did the best he could to maintain his calm.

Celeste sensed a subtle change in Rylor upon sight of Annika, watching his grip around his rifle tighten, then relax, then tighten again.

Annika Sanne seemed indifferent to the weapons levelled at her. The only suggestion she was even aware of the ominous circumstances her life balanced in was her initial eye contact that Rylor had caught from behind his helmet as her gaze flickered with an unquantifiable intelligence.

Unquantifiable because, Rylor realized, staring at Annika, drinking in her form, he had never known what she was thinking. Their years together, their life together, their shared breaths and stolen moments, even their child: he knew now, he had never known her at all.

She didn't recognize him. For a brief heartbeat, a lost breath, a frozen image now engraved, he thought she looked into his lenses and saw not an expressionless, featureless Enforcer, but Rylor Ings – the man, the father of her child – but she continued to scan the room, and that moment when he would have done anything for her, ceased to exist. She did not recognize his bearing, she did not recognize his posture, she did not recognize him.

She recognized nothing.

Rylor could pick Annika out in full gear from a room of Enforcers. Such a connection was not broken in the donning of armor, it was beyond that. The subtle nuances that made her, her, could never be hidden from him.

But this bond was not reciprocated. So sure was she of his death, Rylor knew, she did not see him.

He was dead to her, and she had been the one to pull the trigger.

From first sight the facial-recognition software of Augustus' lenses had been studying the man's features, and in a matter of moments, the Captain knew everything he needed to know about the figure sitting before him.

‘Dr Harold Morentz. You are a man in demand: a list of investigations that stretches back decades, with multiple Corporations employing your services as an “outside consultant”. They must be very brave, or very foolish, to employ one so mired in controversy.’ Augustus marked the Corporations for investigation.

‘Progress… progress demands courage,’ said Morentz. His voice was hard, taut like the steel wire of a garrote, one Augustus knew the doctor felt slowly tightening about his neck. Morentz clasped and unclasped his fingers.

‘It does. Men like you are hard to find, doctor. It takes a singular lack of humanity to do what you do,’ said Augustus. He scanned through the investigations on the doctor: malpractice, gross misconduct, and one crucial factor that emerged again and again; a seeming intent to harm.

‘You, a man outfitted solely to kill, would lecture me on humanity?’ Morentz retorted, his hands forming an arrowhead directed at the Captain.

The doctor is seemingly resigned to whatever fate he was to meet, thought Celeste. But his pride won’t let him go silent.

‘I do not seek to lecture you doctor. Frankly, I do not care what it is you have to say. You are not my superior, and you are not an Enforcer. Thusly, your opinion means nothing,’ Augustus stated.

‘I am a thrice-doctorate of bio-molecular evolution, medicine and psychology, I have studied and learnt more than you will ever – ’ began Morentz.

‘Where is it, doctor?’ Augustus interrupted, employing his vocal-amplifier harshly to cut the doctor’s sentence dead.

‘Where is what?’

Celeste thought: *Morentz is not used to being interrupted. She waited for the inevitable question.*

‘The Artefact,’ Augustus informed.

‘That’s just it, isn’t it? You don’t give a damn about – anything! About the years of painstaking research, the sacrifices made. I am not blind, Captain,’ said Morentz. ‘I know I have performed evil acts… evil acts, but necessary acts, to create new and better worlds.’ The doctor spoke slowly, emphasizing his words. ‘I know there is no place for me in these new worlds – but only my work could make them. And now you would remove this catalyst, and allow us all to slide back into the abyss from whence we crawled.’

‘The Artefact,’ replied Augustus.

‘We have come so far – no other has the courage, the fortitude and the required intellect in correct measurement to do what I have done. I have damned myself for love of my species!’ The doctor’s voice rose as his righteousness fueled by ego gathered momentum.

‘The Artefact,’ repeated Augustus.

‘So I have damned myself for nothing?’ Morentz attempted to rise from his seat but was roughly pulled back down into the chair by one of the Enforcers.

Morentz turned and glared at the Enforcer who had restrained him, then turned back to Augustus. He clasped and unclasped his fingers again, then a third and fourth time. ‘No.’

Annika remains indifferent, noted Celeste.

The fugitive First Recon hadn’t moved, nor had her bearing changed, as the doctor spoke his tirade of justification.

‘Doctor, you can tell us willingly, or I assure you, you will be tortured unto the precipice of death and you will beg to tell us. The Artefact, or suffer. To me, it matters not in which order,’ said Augustus.

‘And what will you do with the Artefact, Captain?’ asked Morentz.

‘That is no longer your concern,’ said Augustus, as he stepped

forward and placed both hands on the desk, looking down at the doctor. ‘I grow tired of your stalling. I am not bluffing, Morentz. Do not test me, because you-will-lose,’ Augustus imitated the doctor’s pattern of speech, emphasizing each word. He allowed the threat several seconds to fester, then continued: ‘Tell me where the Artefact is. Now. Or the pain begins.’

As Augustus spoke, Celeste slowly and deliberately drew her combat blade, letting the light catch its razor edge. She could visibly see the internal struggle of the doctor as he wilted beneath Augustus and threat the Captain held.

But Morentz remained steadfast, and silent.

In two strides Celeste vaulted the desk, lunged, and drove the point of her blade into Morentz’s right kneecap. He screamed as she felt the metallic tip sickeningly force its way through, ripping flesh and grating bone. She twisted the blade to more screams, the leg convulsing beneath, before placing both hands atop it and forcing the blade down to the hit, severing tendons and splitting marrow.

Morentz wailed but uttered no words, breathing with the rhythm of shock, biting his lip so hard blood began to spill, unable to look at the damage done.

Celeste withdrew the blade with a slick spittle of blood, and pressed the tip against his other knee.

‘No – no more,’ gasped Morentz. ‘No more.’

‘The Artefact?’ said Augustus.

Morentz’s faced balled up as he wailed and shook his head side to side. Celeste drove the point down into the second kneecap, following the pattern of the first. She stood up, no longer waiting for Augustus to ask, and pressed the blade against the doctor’s shoulder now, the Enforcer behind him removing his hand. She put pressure on the joint, letting the threat speak for itself. With her free hand, she grasped Morentz’s ruined knee, and squeezed, the force of her power-assisted joints crushing the bone further.

After the screaming had stopped, following by a few seconds of silence where Morentz was clasping his fingers so tightly his knuckles turned white, the doctor semi-incoherently spluttered out the words: 'Down the hall and to the left. The steel door to the chamber without a viewport. The containment field's sequence is 0-3-1-0-6!'

Augustus didn't move, the light of the chandelier above casting his shadow upon the doctor. Celeste nodded to Voya who took left the room with three Enforcers, weapons raised.

Morentz's head fell and he covered his mouth with his hands.

Minutes later, they returned with the Artefact in tow, sealed in a military-grade protective casing.

'Artefact secured,' said Voya.

So small a thing, to condemn me to death, thought Rylor, stood in the corner of the room, his gaze unwavering from Annika. He didn't have to see the Artefact to recall it, so perfectly imprinted upon his memory was its image.

As were the moments it had almost cost his life.

A shot rings out. He turns, raising his weapon, expecting to see a Plague Stage Three firing.

Rylor studied everything about Annika as she stood silent, the only movement the rising and falling of her chest.

He doesn't. It's Annika. She's unloaded a bullet into the Third's skull from behind.

His surroundings had faded now; he could almost pretend he was in another time and place.

She turns to him.

She turned to him, stood standing in the doorway of their bedroom. She looked at him as she held their child.

A shot rings out.

Any moment now, she would smile.

Darkness.

But here, in this reality, far removed from memory, her lips remained impassive.

As Voya confirmed the Artefact had been secured, Augustus, for the first time, turned to look at Annika. *No image, he thought, no matter how intently studied, could ever match the reality.*

He gripped the edges of the wide desk and harnessing the cold fury and desire for vengeance coiled tightly within him, flung it against the wall.

The rich wood splintered from the sheer force. The doctor winced, whether from his shattered knees of the noise of the breaking desk, Augustus did not care. The sound reverberated through the room, followed by an ominous silence. Morentz closed his eyes, as if to shield himself from the Captain's fury.

'I do not believe the mind I was given, I was not supposed to use,' Morentz choked from behind his hands. 'What are any of us here for if not to push the boundaries of our lives and seek that which we desire?' He laid his arms upon the desk in open supplication, raising his eyes to look up at the Captain.

He knows now there is nothing he can say or do to placate, thought Celeste. Forgoing pride, now we will see the man for what he truly is.

'You want to speak of desire, doctor?' Augustus said. His carefully controlled tone was akin to the sound of ice cracking beneath too much weight, the cold snap of the syllables a clear warning not to proceed. 'I desire recompense for those who gave their lives to end your sordid fantasy. The First Recon team you' – he pointed at Annika – 'betrayed. The list is long. Too long. That is what I desire. What is it you, here and now, so desire?'

‘I desire justice! I have not betrayed you – you have betrayed me!’ cried Morentz in a voice fueled by pain and perceived injustice. ‘The Universe is in no fit state. We are born to but suffer and fight! Yes, I fight too Captain. Perhaps not on the front lines, but I fight all the same!’ The doctor gestured wildly, fear and mania cracking his haughty exterior. He pointed at the Captain: ‘I fight ignorance, and fear of progress, to give you and your kind the weapons you need to win these wars! And these wars, what are they but the death throes of a dying animal? Lashing out with it final knowledge that “this is the end”. What good can come from this sorry state of affairs? What is the universe but an arena of bloodshed and misery?’ The doctor was crying now, shouting through tears as he wailed his lamentations, broken in agony. ‘Don’t you understand? He who can destroy a thing, he controls it! And with my work, by controlling the Plague, we can destroy entire worlds. Other races will have to bend the knee. Humanity, so threated on all sides, will become the dominant force in the known galaxy.’ Morentz took a breath, his face flushed, hands curled into fists as his useless legs splayed out beneath him. ‘And as such, the Council, in time, will thank me.’

‘The Plague can’t be controlled,’ said Celeste, bluntly dismissing Morentz’s sermon.

‘It can! I have! Don’t you see? We cannot stop now. There is no going back. We are the fulcrum of the future and nothing great was ever achieved without great sacrifice. I mourn for those lost here, but I would do it again! Wouldn’t you? Don’t you see? How can you not see?’ Morentz’s breathing was ragged, his words laced with high pitches and somber tones as pain continued to course through his body in searing white-hot waves.

The doctor threw up, head lolling, as he struggled for breath.

Augustus stepped back from the doctor and spoke to Voya on a private comm-channel. ‘Take four. Return in one shuttle to the Gorgon’s Fury and secure the Artefact. Inform Command to begin final preparations for departure of Gamma Tau.’

‘Acknowledged,’ said Voya. She gestured at four Enforcers in the room and left, two in front, two behind.

The doctor grasped the sides of his head, sucked in a breath, and, swelling his chest, continued shouting to no-one in particular: ‘Could the Plague be controlled? Could the Plague be guided – even taught? Could we turn an Enforcer? All of these questions, and more, played over and over in my mind. No such thing had ever been done before. But could we? Could we? Could I? Over and over those questions played... with only one logical answer: Yes. If I could ask such a question, I could answer it, also!’ Morentz was positively screaming now, as he witnessed the Artefact be removed from sight, his mania now self-perpetuating. ‘So take my work! My legacy will remain! What I have done cannot be undone! One frontier planet lost, but what I have discovered will… save us all.’ The doctor spat the words at Augustus. ‘And you, all of you – in time, you will die, and be forgotten,’ he shrieked. ‘That is your damnation, for halting the progress of better minds than yours –’

Celeste stepped forward and flung an armored fist at Morentz. His head snapped back from the impact, stunning him. The Interrogator grabbed his hair and forced him to face her before landing three more powerful blows to his face. When she was done the white of her gauntlet was smeared red, as blood dripped from Morentz’s shattered nose and cut and broken cheeks and left eye socket. He coughed out several teeth and sobbed quietly.

‘And what was your role here?’ Celeste asked Annika, still gripping the doctor’s hair.

‘It was a test of loyalty – or the lack of it,’ Morentz wheezed, through tears, gazing at the floor. ‘Annika’s words were hollow until she had proven she meant to see our mutual goal through. There was no other way. Whatever she had done thus far, whatever she promised to do, an Enforcer is still… an… Enforcer.’ Celeste let go of the doctor and looked down at him. Morentz did not meet her gaze. ‘We meant to test whether her mind was under sway… the sway of the ridiculous fanaticism your kind are so famous for…’ The doctor looked up, seeing only vague outlines of his captors. ‘But what could prove such a thing?’

‘A test,’ said Augustus to Annika. ‘You killed your entire squad, for a test?’

‘Betrayal,’ said Annika, speaking for the first time: ‘A word tyrants use to describe independent thought.’

Annika’s voice matched her form: gentle, relaxed. And in that similarity was a haunting chill, for her words, much like her poise, like every muscle and fiber of her body, was harnessed and delivered with cool, calculated logic. The same voice Augustus had heard on the public comm-channel atop the Corporation tower after he had requested shuttle extraction. *The same voice that condemned us to die, he thought, with three simple words: it’s not coming.*

Three words. Three words that had been delivered like the blows of a knife into his gut as their shuttles were engulfed in flame, and he watched the men and women under his command prepare themselves for death at the hands of a howling, shrieking, inhuman infection.

I promised the debt would be paid, in full, thought Augustus.

‘Could an Enforcer willingly turn their weapon upon their own?’ Annika said, her eyes flashing. ‘Anything else is mere speculation.’ Her gaze went distant, as if she saw something within the room no others could. ‘Worlds without war,’ she whispered.

‘Yes, a test,’ supported Morentz, his deep breathing slowly steadying though spittle still fell from his open mouth. ‘One performed beyond all expectation. Annika could swear on the heavens and the stars, the new and forgotten gods, on the very life of her child, and still... we would not believe her. But the… summary… execution of her own? Now, there was a test that could harbor no subterfuge. No falsehood. There would be no way back for her should she prove her devotion to our vision here. We are so close to seeing that vision a reality…’

The doctor hacked up blood, some landing on Celeste’s armor. She looked down at the red stains. *A swollen jaw is difficult to speak though, she mused.*

‘When she pulled the trigger, we knew her words to be true,’ Morentz finished.

‘It was your idea, wasn’t it?’ Augustus stated to Annika. ‘You offered this up.’

The ex-First Recon Enforcer slowly nodded.

Rylor, witnessing the exchange with an ever-growing numbness, was aware of this all, but somehow felt above it, removed from it, a silent third party observer, a ghost. But as Annika nodded, and confirmed it was her idea to put a bullet in him, he felt something deep within him break so violently he physically recoiled within his armor.

‘Why?’ said Rylor, using his vocal-amplifier to distort his voice.

Annika regarded him from his periphery of her vision. ‘Worlds without war,’ she said again. ‘A undisputed species; a weapon unmatched. A reign that could last all eternity. And a universe where a child could grow, without fear, without loss. Where a child’s parents wouldn’t be taken, by death or by duty, the left child wondering if they will ever see their mother or father again.’ Annika shook her head. ‘I do not expect you to understand, but I know of what I speak.’

‘You realize what you have done, correct? Few Enforcers have children. Even fewer are granted the privilege to see them, such is the absolute loyalty expected by the Council for the work we must do. You have just damned each and every one of them to have their children removed from them,’ said Celeste.

‘And that is my fault?’ asked Annika, defiance curling across her features. ‘How so?’

‘Because you – an Enforcer – turned upon your own with the admittance it was for ou–your–a child!’ exclaimed Rylor; so close had he been to saying “our”. Where before there had been numbness, now there was a boiling rage, with the realization should he survive this their daughter, his daughter, would be taken from him regardless.

Celeste sensed Rylor’s control slipping at the mention of his daughter and Annika’s obliviousness to his presence, though his

stumble of words has sparked a curious look in Annika's eye. It was quickly hidden, but Celeste saw it, nonetheless.

She signaled to Augustus: *we have to end this.*

I have one last question, Augustus replied. If Rylor moves to aggression, restrain him. 'You say your work will live on, doctor,' Augustus said, judgment weighing heavy in his voice. 'I want you to know, before you die, I am going to have this place destroyed.'

'But you cannot!' said Morentz. 'Your first rule: contain outbreak, preserve infrastructure!'

'There is nothing here that cannot be rebuilt. Furthermore, I have been reprimanded before. I will face the consequences, regardless of what they are, in the knowledge that what you offer, was far worse: madness. Worlds without war?' Augustus said, turning to address Annika. 'Delusions of grandeur. Such a thing is impossible.'

'It isn't,' the doctor hissed.

'Very well. You say your work will live on, doctor. You claim, that what you have done, cannot be undone. Tell me, then. How do you do it? How do you control the Plague? Convince me, after your imminent death, to deliver your work to the Council.'

Morentz laughed, but it sounded more like wheezing through his bloodied face. 'That's it, isn't it? Oh very clever, Captain, but a wordsmith you are not. Deception does not become you. You have to deliver my work, despite what you say. Your first rule: contain outbreak, preserve infrastructure. You won't break that. You can't!' Morentz wheeze-laughed again, victorious mania dancing in his single un-swollen eye. 'The Council will see what I have begun, and I will be exonerated. But, yes, to elaborate:

'The Plague is a biological recoding of the very DNA of all that it touches, directing all functions to infection – or, in another word, procreation. Is that not what all living things seek? To live, to thrive, to spread? So I followed this line of enquiry. Deep down in the heart of living, at the molecular level, the Plague and we are essentially the same. Survival is the ultimate programming; it is

hardwired into our DNA. “Go forth, and multiply”. Isn’t that what the religion of Old Earth says? All living things seek the same: procreation. This is the sole function of the Plague. And so, I harnessed that.’

‘He’s speaking of bait,’ said Celeste, shaking her head. ‘Just simple bait.’

‘Simple bait? Simple bait?’ Morentz susurrated. ‘No! Bait, perhaps, but not simple. Never simple. You say simple because you believe anyone could do it, perhaps? Not true. Sometimes, the simplest actions are the hardest, and if that is the case, then simple they are not. I did it, because I could. And no other ever has, had, or would. And you say simple? Decades of work, leading to here and now:

‘I chose Annika, from the moment of cutting her open to deliver her child, having seen the fierce protectiveness she had. And every time she returned home, we spoke, of how she longed to stay with her child, but never could. Like myself, the right qualities, in the right amounts; such a rare amalgamation.

‘I chose Gamma Tau and its population. Employing the right connections and working for the right Corporations, to agree bring me here.

‘I chose to fund my research.

‘Yes, call it bait, then, to redirect the Plague’s attention. I released live bait, and with the specimens we recovered, I could investigate their biological properties without interference, and recode it myself, to following orders.

‘And you, you stand there in your righteousness, and have the gall to call my work simple,’ Morentz finished.

‘Bait – unarmed civilians – you are speaking of unarmed civilians. You sent them to a fate worse than death. I’ve seen the bodies doctor. Children,’ retorted Celeste.

‘Who are you to say what is worse than death? You, who stand there, clad in the armor the Council has made specifically to inspire

fear in those they claim to govern justly? Have you not killed children, human or otherwise? Have you not just about killed anything that could walk, talk, or crawl upon the planets? Oh yes, I know you, Enforcer. I know your ilk. You are mere weapons. Deadly weapons, yes, but weapons all the same. A tool. A thing to be used, then discarded. The Council propagates the myth of the Enforcer, the fanatical loyalty, the unwavering devotion, only to rule. It seeks to grind the galaxy under its heel, and you are the boot which they wear to do so. That is your lot in life.'

'Everything I have done,' said Celeste, 'I would do again, in the knowledge it was necessary. And only – ever – necessary.'

'My point exactly,' spoke Morentz, loathing filling his voice.

'And have you?' Augustus interrupted, holding up a hand for silence.

'Have I what?' Morentz replied.

'Have you succeeding in recoding the Plague to follow orders?'

'Inconclusive, but with promising results,' Morentz said. 'Extremely promising.'

'In other words, you failed,' Augustus stated.

'You failed,' repeated Celeste to Morentz. 'It's that simple.'

'Human error has ever been the bane of scientific study. Failure is but the path to success. Others will follow, who will finished what I started,' said Morentz, shrugging, with a look of resignation; a grotesque appearance, as swollen and bloodied as his face was.

Celeste placed herself between Annika and Morentz and faced the doctor.

'We know more of the Plague than you ever could, doctor. Interesting that you never consulted the Enforcers? Rather, you employed a traitor.'

‘Because I knew I would be shut down.’

‘Exactly. Because what you’re attempting to do, cannot be done.’ Harold Morentz opened his mouth to protest but Celeste grabbed his jaw and squeezed, the pressure and pain silencing the doctor. ‘Shut up,’ she said. ‘How long have you studied and festered this doctor? How long have you tortured, mutilated, sacrificed in the name of your fantasy? Twenty years? Thirty years? Longer?’ Celeste let go of his jaw, and laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘No need to answer. It was a rhetorical question, to illustrate the point, this sentence is long overdue.’

As Celeste uttered those final words she slammed the point of her combat blade into the doctors throat and in one swift, violent motion, tore it out. A look of surprise and shock convulsed on the doctors face as he sought to cough or to speak: Celeste couldn’t tell which; she kicked Annika’s knee out, drew her pistol and pressed it to Annika’s temple.

‘No – ’ began Rylor.

Celeste looked to him, looked at Annika, and pulled the trigger.

Annika’s body toppled.

Celeste holstered her pistol and walked to the door, leaving a trail of bloody footprints in her wake where the doctor had collapsed and bled out beneath her. She stopped next to Rylor.

‘If you’re going to shoot, then shoot. Don’t talk.’

Augustus nudged the body with his boot. ‘And so is ended the great doctor.’

‘What of his research?’ asked Celeste.

‘Burn it. Burn it all. There is nothing here but death.’

The doctor looked up at them, his final expression one of shock and disbelief, as his life’s work was immersed in flame.

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Several weeks later, the Enforcers having returned to their respective units, the newly-appointed Commander Augustus was walking with his newest Captain, Celeste Allenova, in the halls of the council. They had just returned from a meeting with High Command, who, following the Annika incident (as it had come to be known), had instituted mandatory sterilization of all Enforcers, with the option of individual reversals should an Enforcer later prove worthy and desire a family. Those who already had children would now undertake hidden study for their motivations and reasoning capabilities regarding their loyalty to the Council compared with that of their families; those who failed would be sent to the worst fronts of war where the mortality rates were highest.

The idea had been Augustus'. It had been well received.

As the two officers discussed the finer points of the implementation of the new protocol, they were interrupted by a direct call to Augustus' comm-link:

'Commander, my apologies for the interruption, but you asked to be informed of any developments of the Enforcer Rylor Ings G38-04,' said an intelligence officer.

Augustus halted and gestured Celeste to do the same.

'And what of him?'

'Commander, I am sorry to inform you, he has shot himself.'

Augustus and Celeste met Rylor in a specialized Enforcer hospital, where the Council's wounded could recover without fear of media intrusion. Rylor had been placed in an isolated ward, the rank of First Recon and the possible questions that needed asking requiring privacy and discretion.

As the Commander and Captain entered, Rylor looked across to the door and turned to what he had been doing before the interruption, staring at the clinically-white ceiling. It was the same shade of

clinically-white as Gamma Tau.

‘They never jam. You know that? Fifteen years of service, and they never jammed. Not once,’ said Rylor. Celeste noted his entire body was taut, tightened, a similar tension to the that he had exhibited during interrogation. ‘And the fact they never jammed saved my life numerous times,’ Rylor continued with prompting. ‘I’d seen it happen, you know? A weapon jam, last moment, meant you got killed instead of your target.’ He did not look at them as he spoke, but continued to stare at the ceiling above.

‘What happened?’ asked Augustus.

Rylor didn’t respond.

‘What happened, Rylor?’ Augustus repeated.

‘Pistol jammed and backfired. Took off my ear.’ Rylor half-heartedly lifted a hand and gestured to the bandage that was wrapped around the right side of his face without looking.

Still he averted his gaze.

‘But saved your life,’ said Celeste

Rylor closed his eyes.

‘Think of your daughter, Rylor. She has already lost a mother. Don’t make her an orphan,’ said Celeste, leaning forward and placing her hands on the metal railing of his bed. ‘You have been granted the Council’s own approval to keep her. Do not waste such a gift.’

‘Because I helped kill her mother. How can I tell her? How can I even look at her?’ he asked, a numbness in his voice that sounded nothing like the soldier Augustus and Celeste had fought beside.

The Commander was in no mood to indulge self-pity. ‘You are an Enforcer. You find a way, or make one. You have survived worse than this. And you will survive this, also. Suicide is but a permanent solution, to temporary problems.’

Celeste touched the side of his face, ran her fingers over the bandage where the stimulants were knitting the flesh back together and rebuilding his ear.

'All things pass, Rylor. This too, will pass,' she whispered.

Rylor thought of Annika. Of who she was, and had been. And of how his daughter would never be able to know. Annika had been removed and erased from all records. Like the planet of her death, her existence had been expunged. And to her daughter, flesh of her flesh, blood of her blood, she would remain nothing more than a faint memory, a ghost, perhaps partially remembered sometime in the distant future when a child had grown and smelt the perfume her mother once wore. The smell would be comforting, but his daughter would not know the reason why. Perhaps a flash of hair or a smile on a stranger would one day awaken a distant and dim memory of infancy, but the image would be hazy, blurred, beyond reach. No. His daughter, she would never know.

And Rylor would never be able to speak of it.

And from the legendary First Recon, tears emerged.

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Celeste gazed over the city, the kaleidoscope of colors washing over her. She could see her family name emblazoned in neon letters across one of the tallest towers, and felt the pull of a smile.

She was glad to be back. But she couldn't stay for long. She never could. None of them could. It was one of the first things that was learnt as an Enforcer – you can never go home.

Many of the soldiers she knew had trouble returning. It was the same for all of them; on the battlefield, they longed for home, longed to return. And when they did, those who survived, all anyone wanted to do was get back out there. Here, at home? People lied. People cheated. There were billions upon billions and each and every single one trying to make their own way. But there… out there, with your brothers and sisters, every Enforcer knew where they belonged. Any one of them would risk their life to save

another, and knew that the same would be done for them. In that heat of battle, a kinship is forged that can never be found anywhere else.

Coming home, you didn't know where you belonged. How could anyone replicate that feeling? How did you find your place in the middle of so many?

No matter what an Enforcer did when they came home – they experienced the memories of their deployment every day. In every touch and gesture they saw two lives; the life they lived now, and the life out there, beyond the horizon, on foreign soil. Their hands would hold their children, and they would recall the touch of a weapon. They would hear a firework from a carnival, and some part of them felt the force of a grenade. They would see aliens, welcoming them at home, identical to the ones who had shot and killed their friends.

And they lived with this, every moment, of every day.

Celeste traced the vine of tattooed roses on her arm, each petal a comrade she had lost.

She did not know one Enforcer who would not do it all again.

Even Rylor.

Whither Sailed Those Ships?

by Michael Grey

Commodities oil the wheels of the Co-Prosperity Sphere's multitudinous cogs. They are bought, sold, traded. Held in escrow, trust and, often, ransom.

And, sometimes, they are never let go of.

Such a thing in the Sphere, where commerce is an inbred as breathing, is uncommon in the extreme and for it there must be a very, *very*, good reason.

It may be for something which is unique. The galaxy is after all vast, and its treasures uncatalogued. Or it could be something as intangible as information.

It should be remembered that the Co-Prosperity Sphere is really quite immense. Hundreds of Corporations, each fed by thousands of subsidiaries which in turn oversee the daily running of planets and star systems still not entirely counted. A bureaucracy as monolithic as Corporation Central will never truly hold onto all the secrets it tries to keep.

Among the rumours leaking core-wards from the edges of the expanding Sphere space there is one which is insistent in its telling. What makes this story stand out from the rest is unusual enough to remark upon by itself.

What is essentially the same series of events are told by the dust miners in the Aquila Rift, to overstressed salarymen in the core systems. If anyone were to sit near them as they relay the story in any of a multitude of bars, they would hear of an incursion into a planet's space.

The planet in each story is always home to a population of humans, and is universally new to the Sphere. The infrastructure and governance which a Corporation brings to a new world is already in place. But the, what some may uncharitably say, innocence is still

present, and yet to be crushed by the weight of commerce and consumerism inclusion in the Sphere inevitably brings.

That a Sphere world, with its military grade security, field projectors and sub space scanners could have its atmosphere invaded would be worrying enough. But that the incursions come from *within* the planet's own atmosphere raises its own frightening questions.

What follows is of even more concern for a body whose rule is virtually notional across the gulfs of interstellar space.

The contact, as the tales go, by now fully lit by the same systems which failed to pick it up only minutes before, is tracked across the planet's surface. Always it appears travelling south from the northern pole on the planet's dark side, and makes for the nearest population centre.

Protocols for unexpected inner-atmosphere contacts are laid down by Corporation Central and as inflexible as the old men who wrote them. They state that all contacts with a planet's zone should be tracked and all details recorded, but not intercepted until an assessment to its attributes is made. After all, there is little point in destroying possibly new exploitable technology, and the loss of a few cities is deemed worth the risk for some unexpected profit.

The contact reaches the city in a time which should be impossible for an atmospheric vessel. Its telemetry dictates the air around it should burn with superheated friction, and the ground below and behind flattened by a shockwave more associated with space-faring warships. But to all intents and purposes, according to the readings, for all the affect it has on its surroundings it may as well not be there.

Dependant on the topography, the planetary Governor will be notified or awakened as the target leaves the first population centre and moves towards the next by proximity. It would be noted at this point by those monitoring the occurrence, that the returning data from the contact does not accord to any known vessel type. It's smaller than most personal transports, and not made of any alloy which would be able to absorb the stresses it is exerting upon itself

without shattering. In fact, the readings suggest a combination of organic and vegetable matter, with only a small a percentage of its mass given over to any artificial compound.

Questions are then asked to the contact's intent. It spends only minutes in a city before departing for another, following the planet's dark side as it spins its night cycle. No reports come in from the cities it visits of untoward occurrences. No odd explosions, no breaches of municipal buildings. It is as if it is there for completely un-malign purposes. But that it is doing something cannot be denied. The signal flits around the urban area with such alacrity that the traces it leaves on the tracking computer rapidly paint the screens red, and then it is gone, zipping off to the next centre with a force of acceleration which no interceptor can match.

The world's governors are left to sit helpless as the contact moves from one city to the next with impunity, intentions unknown. They watch with greedy eyes, all lusting after a technology which could move so quickly that all land battles would be a foregone conclusion to Sphere victory, and realising with growing frustration that it will remain intractably outside their reach.

It is only when this reality is accepted that the governor will give the order, the contact re-classified as a target, and the orbit-based strategic deterrents triggered. Missiles, no larger than a table knife, are aimed, locked and released at the target. A basic Corporation planet's only armament capable of attaining the speed of the contact, and detonating with a sub-nuclear warhead designed to protect the infrastructural investment on the surface below.

For the planets still without even the most basic of defences, however, the contact will continue its journey, visiting each town and city in turn, following the sweep of the planet's dark side, and returning towards the northern pole before a single day/night cycle has been completed. Come the morning no sign will be found of the contact, and no reason would discerned for its visitation.

The story, retold from a billion different mouths from a thousand different worlds, is in constant circulation, despite the best efforts of the Council Protection Agency, gaining momentum towards the end of every one Terran year, and varies only in the teller's own

personal dialect and how the tale leaked to the general population.

The origin of the contact's origin varies almost as much as there are people to speculate. Yet there are some threads which are insistent in their resurgence.

The most persistent is that humanity is joined loosely by a shared conscious, born and grown through our speciesal adolescence, when experiences were collectively shared and filtered into purity. That our early perceptions of the world passed into group awareness in the form of folklore and stories, handed down from one generation to the next, until a critical mass of humanity realised an anthropomorphic resonance. A literal bringing to life an echo of Earth's lost children.

In the modern galaxy's sterile outlook of science and logic, such views are not even deemed laughable. What is undeniable however, are the statistics. That as time rolls on, as what ties the people hold to an Earth they have never known withers, so do the incursions. Until all that is left are rumours thrown out as diaspora, questions, and the cryogenically stored evidence of their happening. In vats across ten thousand worlds, in the heart of mega structures deep within catacombs of sheet steel rooms where the light will never shine again, are the remains of ragged fur scraps, hoof, gaily painted wood and singed patches of red cloth.

For more stories like this, visit Michael's blog at
www.michaelgrey.com.au

Exham IV: Ironbreaker

by “redemption”

The dull thud of weapons fire carried well through the thinning atmosphere of Exham IV. For hours now the shots had interrupted the frantic peace in the station, but there had been no word from anyone yet as to why all shuttles had been cancelled. Only that they were to remain where they were until further notice. It was clear now to everyone in the station that something terrible was happening outside the walls of Space Port Salvation. In fact, something terrible had been happening on Exham IV for quite some time. In its past the planet had been incredibly resource rich owing to collisions with other planetary bodies in its formative years. Following its discovery and the very literal bidding war that followed, Mi-Gan corporation had emerged the victor and turned the planet into an industrial mining center.

Twelve cycles ago Exham IV had almost collided with a rogue planet hurtling through space, resulting in a catastrophic orbital shift away from the systems star. The terrible ice age had slowly put an end to all mining operations on the planet as conditions rapidly deteriorated. Much of Exham IV was now abandoned, the vast urban areas and enormous mining colonies that were once home to billions were now left seemingly empty and devoid of life. All urban areas that is, except Transit Station ‘Salvation’. The transit station was a mid-sized space port with 3 launch bays built into the central structure that acted as landing platforms for shuttle craft that took travelers to and from Priory orbital station. What was left of Exham IV’s population had dubbed the place Salvation, as it had been the only remaining transit station on the planet for some time.

White Talon Security, a leading name in private force application, had deployed Marine company D-7 ‘Ironbreakers’ on Exham IV one cycle ago. Led by the enigmatic Major Vaughn, their orders had been to supervise the security situation developing around the space port. This high-profile contract was brought on by the outbreak of a new plague on the already dying planet. The sickness began with severe subconjunctival hemorrhaging. Eventually hypovolemic shock set in. The victim would then drown in their own dissolving

lung tissue; thus, the disease had been dubbed the 'bleeding sickness'. Those under the age of 12 or over the age of 65 seemed to carry the virus but very rarely died from it. The rest of the population weren't so lucky, resulting in an 80% fatality rate. Despite all attempts at medical intervention the virus was still decimating the population, turning the planet into a refugee crisis.

Most of the company were billeted at the still bustling and profitable orbital station Priory, their presence reassuring the hundreds of ships that passed through Priory every week on their way to the outer systems. With them were 3 full strength battalions of Mi-Gan troopers who performed the day to day security operations for the station. The terms of the contract had been simple; to supervise Mi-Gan operations and deal with any situations the less well trained battalions couldn't handle. Having spent a year since the outbreak on the planet evaluating the performance of the Mi-Gan marines, Major Vaughn had ordered all officers including those on planet to report to Priory command center to 'politely' discuss his findings. Leaving a skeleton crew of White Cat officers to maintain order, Vaughn had put captain Walsh in command on the planet for what had supposed to be a few hours.

Three hours later, Walsh and his team had lost contact with the orbital station. In the resulting panic the already desperate refugees had attempted to attack the outer wall, they hadn't even come close before the automated defenses along the outer perimeter had blown them to pieces. At least that was what everyone had thought, as the captain and twelve veteran white talon marines were found torn to pieces a few hours later by what seemed to be crude handmade cleavers of some kind. They were still investigating how anyone had breached the security perimeter undetected.

Approaching 30, Company Lieutenant Medford had led his platoon for the past 2 years. His field promotion to Lieutenant following the brutal fighting on Icran III was the stuff of legend. In fact, after the Forgefather Wars that followed Lieutenant Medford was one of the most highly decorated heroes of the company. Medford was a born leader, highly respected for his code of ethics and calm head in times of crisis. What the Lieutenant lacked was the company connections, rich parents or blackmail material normally required to for high level promotion in the various private military organizations that made up the Galactic Co-Prosperity Sphere

Marine Corps.

This time however, Medford's position of respect in the company had earned him the rank of next in command, as the new captain was extremely dead. Fighting had continued non-stop as the survivors had tried desperately to overrun the automated defenses. The cost in civilian lives was no longer worth counting. Now he was in command of a situation that was long past his control, all he could do was hold out and hope for reinforcements.

Space port Salvation was a 400-foot-tall carbon-steel sphere, coated in a blast proof protective glass sheath that reflected the three concentric walls surrounding the station. The walls had been repurposed by the security forces, and now functioned as security barricades and quarantine containment centers. The outer wall of the facility had been modified many cycles ago to separate the residential slums outside the transit station from the hotels turned refugee camps within the outer rings. Exham IV was for all intents and purposes a dead planet now, it's entire population dedicated to leaving the system for a better life elsewhere or resigned to their fates amongst the cold iron rich dust of their homes.

This created an enormous logistical challenge for the station staff and White Talon. Those fortunate enough to be deemed uninfected could take residence between the outer and middle rings. This area was originally designed for travelers entering the station and still performed its primary functions, with marines and station staff ensuring only those who had been approved for travel were allowed into the station proper. The area between the middle ring and the main station barricade was packed with the recently erected cheap concrete structures. These buildings were home to the two Mi-Gan battalions and thousand strong station staff that were responsible for maintaining order in the overcrowded space port.

Medford sighed. Taking a deep breath, he began the short march from the helipad to the hastily erected forward command center. The irony of waiting for rescue from Salvation didn't escape him. But he reminded himself that there were two thousand very unlucky civilians now trapped inside Salvation's main building. Not to mention the rest of planets population that had taken refuge in the slums that had formed beyond the outer rings of the station.

“Gentlemen, we’re in trouble.”

The Lieutenant’s tone was grave as he addressed his newly improvised command structure. “We all know what a planetwide nav shutdown protocol means.” The veterans stared intently at the officer in front of them, already knowing what he was about to say. “The Council of Seven has grounded the planet. What that means for us is that we’re stranded on a frozen iron-oxide hell hole, surrounded by a diseased and desperate population who have suddenly taken to throwing themselves at our metaphorical bullets.”

The Lieutenant moved over to the table that stood in the center of the room. On the table stood a holographic map emitter that contained live relay feeds of the surrounding space port. The Lieutenant tapped in the authorization codes via the command device at his wrist, quickly bringing up the live feed holograph of Salvation. The red warning symbol flashed above the display, acting as a grim reminder that the feed from orbital station was absent. Beckoning the soldiers to the table, he moved the projection into focus around the outermost ring..

Activation of the live feed revealed the carnage unfolding below. From beyond the wall Medford and his command could see hundreds of unreadable targets attempting to engage with the automated turrets and marines stationed along the barricades. Riot demographic software had flagged the engagement, and had deployed the turrets lining the outer walls to return fire with high caliber explosive munitions. This barely registered with the lieutenant, or the other marines present whose eyes were drawn to the enormous red alert covering the northern sector of the outer wall. A flurry of symbols and warning rushed across the projection, warning of heightened distressed levels from the crowd. The marines didn’t need the warning symbols to see what was happening. The display above them showed hundreds of thousands of desperate potential infected had gathered since nav-transmissions had ceased. Medford didn’t need tactical overlay to understand what was happening. They were preparing to break through the wall, or die in the attempt.

Muttered curses began to fill the room. The handful of them had been forced to take charge of the hundreds of marines stationed at salvation, now they were facing a full scale planetary uprising. Comms chatter accompanied the panicked voices that filled the room as the marines stationed on the outer wall requested further orders. Medford raised his fist, the sudden movement of the acting station commander took the assembled men and women by surprise, ushering silence into the room. “I want at least 4 Mi-Gan platoons stationed on that wall-” The command radio strapped to his shoulder came to life before he could finish. “Sir this is Corporal Reeves, acting Q4 command, What the hell are you boys doing? I mean- sorry to interrupt ‘sir’ we need command to outer wall Q4 ASAP.”

The Lieutenant smiled. Reeves had served under Medford for 2 years now; he was a good soldier and friend that always spoke his mind. Occasionally though, that also meant using his skillset to hack command frequencies he shouldn’t even be aware of, to relay said thoughts. “We know corporal, sit tight. Keep the marines in cover and let the robots do their job.” He looked up at the men in front of him and prepared to give orders. “Cavalry incoming.”

Medford finished relaying commands to the troops from his seat on one of the Standard Pattern GCPS Hornet Transport ships on standby close to the station building entrance. Soaring above the outer walls, the hornet performed a high-altitude surveillance maneuver over the desperate ocean of bodies forming below. Digital enhancement from the relay feed was one thing, but holograms left no room for instinct. The crowd was wreathed in the dust cloud formed by their numbers, meaning the only effective reconnaissance was from the air. Even at this height Medford could smell the violence in the atmosphere, yet he struggled to understand the scale of what was happening. What could have driven these people to such madness? There was no way all of them could be infected, but a gathering like this was a feast for blood disease and suicide for everyone else. There was something here that didn’t add up, he was sure of it. Medford closed the observation port and stood from his seat, using the handles that lined the transport compartment to steady himself, he made his way to the cockpit. “I’ve seen enough. Bring us down on top of the wall over there.” He gestured to the landing platform where he had ordered Reeves and the rest of the White Talon troops already at

the walls to gather.

As the Hornet began its descent, Corporal Reeves couldn't help but think that the trumpets of heaven might sound a lot like the thrum of those wing mounted propellers. The corporal had the long thin nose, handsome features and tightly trimmed beard typical of his core world heritage. Despite his youthful face and notorious sense of humor, at twenty-six years old Corporal Reeves could easily have passed for a man in his 30's. "Have a nice trip Medford?" The lieutenant sighed as he jogged down the ramp past the troops assembled below. "That's lieutenant to you core-shine". Reeves laughed, "You're not going to like this 'lieutenant', but it's only me, Brooks and seven of the newbies stationed here. Oh, and about four hundred Mi-Gan. So, it's ten to ten thousand I guess." Medford struggled not to laugh at the reactions of the assembled Mi-Gan troopers. He found it hard to argue with the corporal's assessment.

Even the newest White Talon recruit was a veteran of at least four years with an exemplary record. So he knew these men were battle hardened at least; their pay and equipment reflected that fact. White Talon protective gear was state of the art, and the reinforced carbon-fiber armor plating of their armor was adorned in the uniform white of their employers. The red insignia on their helmets marked their platoon and company assignment.

Even the black company-issue under-armor that covered the rest of their bodies was engineered for sub-zero combat conditions and was inlaid with the ballistic resistant fibers and Nano-circuitry which linked to their helmet visors, providing advanced tactical overlay. The mass produced standard issue black armor and outdated rifles that the rest of their comrades were equipped with seemed stone age by comparison. It reflected the poor training and equipment standards Mi-Gan corporation had employed until now. Not that he blamed the troops for their inexperience, nearly all of them had only joined the corporation security forces to secure a trip off world for them and their families when they were done.

Medford acknowledged Brooks with a nod. "We sure this is everyone?" Brooks didn't return the gesture, instead finishing the sight adjustments on her rifle before she replied. "Fraid so mon capitaine" Medford sighed, he had long since given up trying to engage with the standoffish markswoman. Instead he called for

attention from the assembled soldiers.

“Ok boys and girls, you each get 40 of Exham’s finest. I want 800 meters of overlapping fire on the causeway. Mark your scopes. From what I can see they’re going to try and rush the gates and batter them down somehow; it’s the only explanation I have for this madness.” He turned to address the Mi-Gan troopers now, softening his tone. “Chances are no one is going to have to take a single shot, the turrets will do their work before they even get close. But this is about as big a crowd as you greenhorns can imagine, so I want us all prepared for the worst. White Talon is in command for this operation, see your handlers for orders. Move out!”

It took minutes for the marines to get to their position. Autocannons and riflemen now lined the barricades, ready to support the automated defenses. The cloud of dust was edging closer now, obscuring the mob’s advance. It began with a trickle at first, like pebbles on a mountain. One after the other groups began to charge out of the dust, screaming incoherently before being pushed back by the withering hail of explosive munitions from the turret defenses. Eventually Medford made his address. “Civilians, stand down and await processing approval. Any attempts to breach the perimeter will be met with deadly force.”

As if in reply a great shriek filled the air, taking the lieutenant by surprise. Before Medford’s brain could recognize the distinctive screech, another sound pierced the air. The throng charged forward all at once, and the battle for Space Port Sanctuary began.

The marines opened fire at the 800-meter mark. A flurry of laser fire rained down from the riflemen along the walls, taking a bloody toll on the first wave of bodies. Moments later the gore-soaked thoroughfare was set ablaze as the marines unleashed their heavy weaponry. From the walls, the sound of the automatic weapons fire was barely loud enough to muffle the screams of the dying. Medford watched in growing horror as the crowd charged on regardless, possessed by some madness. At 600 meters the automatic defenses reset their targeting parameters. Ignoring the unidentified weapons fire attempting to distract the defenders, they turned their attention on the crowd below. Thousands died in minutes, but this wasn’t enough to slow the tide. By now the force of the crowd was too much for those in the front to resist as they

tried desperately to flee the killing ground. At the 500-meter mark, tears streaming down his eyes, Medford drew his rifle and joined the marines with controlled bursts of fire from his weapon. At 400 meters, as he began to reload for the second time he could see Brooks and Reeves franticly yelling down the speaker system. It was impossible to hear what they were saying above the roar of heavy weapons fire, but the pain in their eyes told Medford all he needed to know.

At 300 meters the tidal wave that had set upon the space port finally began to break against the hail of fire from the defenders as they brought their grenade launchers to bear. The impetus of the charge had broken. Now the mob of infected had devolved into pockets of desperate survivors taking cover amongst the fresh craters lining the causeway. Most of the marines, weapons spent, were slumped against their barricades in various states of shock, unable or unwilling to process what they had done. Medford ran to Brooks, grabbing the intercom radio from her shaking hands. He climbed atop the barricade in full view of the crowd below, a black silhouette against the setting sun. Medford screamed down the speaker system. “Retreat you idiots! Stop this insanity!” Minutes went by without reply from below, the marines had stopped firing into the crowd but without any sign of retreat Medford was forced to keep the automated defenses active suppressing the rest of the infected. As the distant star illuminated the scene unfolding below, the automated defenses at their position began to shut down one after the other, munitions either spent or barrels overheated. With the thud of the weapons gone, an eerie silence filled the air.

Another shriek filled the air from somewhere in the dust beyond. If the infected below were already desperate, now they were frenzied with panic. Many of them rushed forward, seeing their opening and crowding at the gate. The horror of realization dawned on Medford as the civilians below pounded the steel of the closed security gate. This time he had recognized the screeching cry. Before he could speak the words, the world below was washed away under a tsunami of amber yellow and dark fur.

The creatures that burst from the ruins of Exham IV raced on bipedal legs. Humanoid only in the roughest sense, they each had an extra joint below the knee and vicious claws that tipped the dark matted fur of their limbs. This evolutionary advantage gave them

incredible speed as the horde descended on the surviving infected. Many tried to flee along the no man's land to the side of the causeway, seeking the shelter of the buildings meters away. Those same buildings stained crimson by the sunset, released their deadly contents onto the fields surrounding salvation.

Elongated rodent like skulls and jaws filled with filthy yellow fangs tore into flesh while crude laser weapons fired haphazardly into the panicked crowds. With the defenses interrupted, the marines could do nothing but watch the massacre unfold before them. The deep pang of the alien lasers had confirmed the lieutenant's worse fears. He had fought these creatures before; on Icran III, they had taken to calling the strange weapons ray-guns. The creatures that carried them were part of the largest infestation he had ever seen. Behind the wall, enormous mining drills began to erupt from beneath the surface, unleashing their deadly payload across the station. Medford leapt from his position as the first of the beam weapons hit the barricade, landing amongst the soldiers he rallied the stunned troopers. "Retreat!" He yelled, sprinting down the barricade. He set his transmitter to all frequencies "All forces retreat to the inner wall, lift the processing and bring everyone you can into the inner ring. It's the Veer-Myn!"

When orbital station Priory received grounding protocol instructions White Talon forces had been put on full alert. At the time an apparent technical error had left the officers isolated in the command room, meaning White Talon marines were tasked with guarding the command vital operations of the station until command operation were restored. Meanwhile, the hundreds of Mi-Gan troops around the station had been remotely tasked with isolating all non-essential personnel to their ships or quarters. Despite this, the Veer-myn assault had still taken them all by complete surprise. They were everywhere in seconds, cutting through the surprised defenders with uncanny speed and savagery. They came at them from the vents, from the maintenance corridors and the container holds stored all over the orbiting station. Brutal fighting erupted around the station as isolated groups fought desperately for survival.

Approaching his mid-forties, Sergeant Tanner was just about sick and tired of fighting for his life. Unleashing a furious torrent of napalm death from the flamer at his hip, his laughter was the only

reply to the shrieks of the Veer-myn that filled the hallway. The stench of burning metal and singed fur filled the sergeant's lungs. Tanner lowered the flamer at his hip, grinning to the shocked mi-gan troops "Extra crispy boys, that's how you cook a rat!" he said. Not content to sit and guard the defunct communications room, Tanner had taken his 10 marines into the thick of the fighting, picking up as many Mi-Gan troopers as they could along the way. The immediate hallway in front of them cleared of the brightly armored bipedal creatures, the sergeant addressed the men. "Now here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna burn, shoot and stab our way to the armory just ahead. *Then we're gonna save those core-shiners in the command room and get ourselves a nice bonus. Who's with me?"*

The cheer of the assembled men and women was cut short by the shrieking reply of the Veer-myn reinforcements. "You know the drill people: urban engagement fire pattern." The Sergeant turned to face the handful of survivors they had found. "Private Stan!" The Mi-Gan weapons specialist jumped to attention. "I want you and your boys to take those weapons of yours and melt every air vent in this corridor as we pass it, do you understand me private?" The young trooper shouted over the barrage of the marines just ahead "Yes sir!". Tanner had put him in charge of the rear guard a few minutes earlier, as his name was the easiest to remember.

The Veer-myn charge lost its momentum under the hail of coordinated laser fire. With no cover to be had in the long corridor the marines had the advantage over the poorly equipped creatures, who were once again forced back by the steady advance of Tanner's marines. "Just a few more meters, then the door is on the right. Private how're we doing back there?"

"Doing fine Sir! Got a couple before they could jump out of the vents!" The sergeant whooped in delight.

"Hell yes Private, that is what I like to hear!". Meter by meter the troopers advanced down the corridor. As they passed another ventilation shaft at their feet, one of the Mi-gan troopers moved to weld the vent shut, but this time the stalking creature inside was ready. The trooper was met with a flurry of laser fire as the creature burst from its hiding place. She fell to the ground, two cauterized wounds beneath her shattered breastplate. Sergeant Tanner

answered in kind, sending the Veer-myn soldier flying into the wall with the metal toe of his boot. One of the marines ahead finished the job, grabbing the alien's fleshy tail and shoving his pistol in its jaw.

Before his comrades could avenge the dead nightcrawler, the sergeant shoved the nozzle of his flamethrower into the exposed vent and pulled the trigger. When the squealing finally abated, the sergeant ordered the group forward again.

The Veer-myn had not expected to be on the defensive and were caught unawares by the surprise counter attack. Tanner and the group cut through the hallway, their shots racing after the unprepared nightcrawlers. When they arrived at the armory doors, the marines formed a defensive perimeter. The Mi-Gan troops moved into in the room first with the sergeant at their heads. Finding no enemy targets, the marines fell back into the room. Rifles at the ready, they backed into the room with drilled precision, firing in controlled burst that kept the Veer-myn behind cover and unable to follow. As the last of the marines fell in, two troopers moved to secure the armory door, the rest took up defensive positions facing the doorway.

Tanner opened the second blast door, revealing the hundreds of rifles and ammunition packs that lay beyond. The sergeant strode past the weapons to the green crate which was marked with the white insignia of a hawk talon holding a large caliber bullet. A fierce grin covered his face as he addressed the room. "We're still breathing folks, good job. Pass those charge packs forward Private Stan. We're gonna need a lot of ammunition." The Sergeant opened a hatch above the container and keyed in his passcode. He gestured to the flamethrower at his hip, and then to the contents of the munitions container. "How many of you recruits know how to use a fire stick?" Unfortunately for the alien creatures massing in the hallways beyond, every trooper present raised their hands.

Vaughn ducked under the blade of the creature in front of him, the speed of the human's movements caught the alien by surprise as the wild swing took it off balance. Seeing his opening, Vaughn stepped into the night stalker's guard and took its throat in a vice like grip. The creature's armor grasped in his other hand, the major roared in defiance and pulling at the yellow metal plates bolted to the Veer-

myn's flesh. Agonized screeching flew through the room as the armor came away. splitting the creatures body almost in half. Vaughn tossed the corpse over the barricade into the crowd of stunned Veer-myn. He hadn't drawn his pistol since the fighting began; there was no need.

The Major, along with the rest of the station's command structure, had been isolated on the command deck by the Veer-myn saboteurs. While outside the command deck where the Veer-myn began their assault, the commanders of the station had been ambushed first. This kind of fighting suited the battalion: they were White Talon's void warfare specialists, and operated well in the tight confines of the station. But despite their best efforts many had been killed in the first hours of the ambush. When the marine officers had run out of ammunition, most had begun using their side arms as hand weapons, waiting for the opportunity to crack skulls or stab at exposed patches of fur and flesh. Some of the Mi-gan officers had managed to figure out how to use the weapons the aliens carried and were providing suppressing fire as best they could with the crude pistols. Their initiative had not escaped the colonels notice. Reading the situation, he had led the men into the control room sealing all but one entrance.

Now there was only one way for the aliens to reach them, a long well-barricaded corridor. If they wanted to breach the command room then they would have to pay for it in blood. The first few assaults had been repelled easily enough, but beyond the barricade the troops could spy another crowd of Veer-myn. This time something was different. The alien swarm parted, making a path for the hulking creature beyond.

The enormous Veer-myn was covered in thick steel plates, colored the same bright yellow as it's comrades. It shared the same rat-like features, but the size of this new beast dwarfed its lesser brethren. Heavy footfalls filled the ruined corridors of the command deck as the creature moved forward, hunched low to avoid hitting it's armored head on the ceiling of the corridor. The deck fell silent as the marines spied the creature preparing to advance on them. Without warning, the creature rushed forward, moving with the same vicious agility as the rest of the Veer-myn and taking the horrified marines by surprise. A great crash sounded from the front of the lines as the barricade broke apart.

The genetically enhanced nightmare was among them in seconds. Huge claws attached to knotted muscles tore through the nearest marine. Shrieking in delight. The beast fired up the enormous mining drill in its right hand, mauling any troops that came within range. The marines were routed by the sudden appearance of the monster and fell back en mass. Lost in blood lust the nightmare charged forward on its powerful legs, taking a bloody toll on the fleeing soldiers. What marines had escaped the initial impact fled through the corridor, ignored as the nightmare fell into a frenzy of greed, tearing into the flesh of the fallen troopers with its gore stained muzzle. It didn't take long before the nightcrawlers were hot at their heels, picking off marines with laser fire or leaping at exposed backs, terrible blades cutting into unprotected gaps in their armor.

Then the Major was amongst them, his famous beam revolver finally drawn from the holster at his hip. The deep boom of laser fire rang through the hallway with each step the commander took. One of the creatures dropped headless onto the floor, another flew back squealing at the gaping wound in its torso. The chase of the Veer-myn faltered as they were forced to face this new threat. The closest pack member leapt from atop a dead officer to the Majors right, another shot, another step and another dead Veer-myn lay on the ground. Their faith renewed, the soldiers stood behind their commander as he strode forward. Then death rained upon the startled Veer-myn, pushing them back through the hallway, past the hulking monstrosity beyond.

The nightmare was shaken from its feeding frenzy by the sudden change of pheromone signals from the lesser Veer-myn. Alert and ready again, the colonel watched as the beast's enormous frame came hurtling through the corridor, it's massive drill aimed straight for Vaughn and his men. The soldiers watched in horror as the beast raced forward, most fled down the corridor knowing their fate should the drill come close enough. The Major stood firm and vented his laser revolver, calmly adjusting the setting on the grip. The mutated Veer-myn continued its charge down the hallway, roaring in delight. The whirring of the battle drill became deafening as the nightmare was almost upon him. The stench of blood and alien filth overwhelmed the major's senses. The nightmare was nearly close enough now to strike, exactly where Vaughn wanted it.

In a single fluid motion, he lifted his weapon and locked eyes with the creature. “I’m finished with you now, vermin.” Blue light flooded the corridor as the overcharged shot left the barrel of the Majors revolver. A surprised expression would have been painted across the creature’s face Vaughn imagined, were its head still attached. Carried forward by its momentum the corpse skidded forward, grinding to a halt at the commander’s feet.

Vaughn stepped over the steaming corpse of the dead alien and vented his pistol. “To me!” he cried and began his own charge towards the unprepared Veer-myn beyond. The sight of their champion so easily dispatched by the figure racing towards them was too much for the Veer-myn soldiers, and they fled before Vaughn and the battle cries of the rallied marines. The natural speed of the Veer-myn carried them from the battle faster than the marines could follow. Seeking strength in numbers they moved to the sabotaged blast doors that blocked the emergency stair exit of the command deck. One of the larger creatures pushed his way through the crowd, placing a strange orange device on the blast door. Moments later the door shattered, opening the path to freedom for the fleeing horde. The Veer-myn scrambled down the staircase to the deck below, happy to be free from danger for the time being. The larger creature that led the pack was first to the exit. The alien ripped the door from its hinges and the relieved Veer-myn spilled onto the deck below, where they met Sergeant Tanner and the fires of hell.

“Incoming!” Medford fell to the ground beside the men. Another focused beam flew above their heads, missing it’s intended mark and blasting a hole in the wall behind them. Despite their best efforts, the battle was nearly over. They had fallen back to the second barricade with just enough time. As the night-stalkers spilled through the gates and from the ground they had reaped a bloody toll from the first wave of alien invaders, but they were not prepared for the armored assault that followed.

Great tunneling drills had erupted from the concrete beneath the walls, hailing deadly fire on the flanked defenders and trapped civilians. Behind the great tunneling machines came all manner of monstrous nightmares, giant assault troops that had ploughed through the unprepared soldiers. As he ducked beneath another

blast the Lieutenant could see now that he had ordered the retreat to the final barricade too late, leaving the marines in a deadly close quarter struggle as they fought to get to safety. Fortunately the main station building still held: so far the blast proof glass coating of the structure had proven impervious to the heavy laser weapons of the Veer-myn armor.

This was of no solace to Medford and the marines as they fought a desperate retreat to the station building. He knew it was only a matter of time before the tunneling equipment broke through the foundations. giving the creatures the opening they needed to overwhelm the beleaguered garrison. Medford could see the soldiers around him taking cover in the smoldering ruins, doing their best to return fire. But they were hopelessly outgunned and time was running out. The ground shook and the sharp tang of o-zone overwhelmed Medford's senses. Peering over the wall he could see the alien machine was preparing to fire its weapon again. This time the Veer-myn operators found their mark, 4 marines to Medford's right were vaporized as the heavy laser swept through the ruined structure, obliterating all it touched. The Lieutenant could only watch as the next vehicle came into view and opened fire. Red dust and dull ringing replaced the frantic sounds of the battle around him. For a single moment, the only sensations left were the spinning sky and the cold air against his freshly exposed skin. The impact of the concrete was the last thing Medford felt before the world went dark.

"So Major, about that pay rise we were discussing". The sergeant took a swig from his flask, laughing at the look the Major gave him. They had both stopped to catch their breath while the younger men and women finished cleaning the command deck. "What pay rise Tanner?" the Major finally replied.

"Why, they one we're discussing right now sir." The major gave the old sergeant another stern glare for a moment, but was unable to keep up the façade. They both laughed, glad to be alive after the events of the past twenty four hours. "Well Tanner, usually grunts like yourself aren't paid until the jobs done." Tanner offered the flask to his commanding officer, Vaughm gladly obliged. "And I might shoot you yet, so maybe I'll think about it." Tanner knew that was the best he was going to get. He stood, discreetly retrieving his flask before stowing it away out of sight.

“Any further orders sir?”

The Major stood and walked over to the observation window. Staring at the planet below, he thought of the soldiers still down there. With his back still to the sergeant he replied.

“Why, first we’ve got a station to secure and a quarantine to override, enforcers inbound to probably try and kill us all and then we’ve got a planet to rescue.” The Major turned to face Tanner.

“Think you’re up to the task, sergeant?”